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***God Bless the Devil!***



# *God Bless the Devil!*

## LIARS' BENCH TALES

JAMES R. ASWELL

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OF THE TENNESSEE WRITERS' PROJECT

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*Writers' program. Tennessee*

CHAPEL HILL

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## Preface

FOLKLORE IS A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING A WAY of life. The folk story, one of the most colorful components of this lore, is a popular diversion of many Tennesseans who need no instruction on how to spend their leisure time.

GOD BLESS THE DEVIL! is a collection of these tales, designed to show the type stories told and the ease and idiom of the telling. These stories are widely circulated in Tennessee. They have been selected from dozens remembered and written down by staff members of the Tennessee Writers' Project. A great many of them are versions heard in Tennessee alone. In type, however, they belong to the general folk literature of the South.

The twenty-six stories in this book fall roughly into three groups:

Some are tales that can be attributed definitely to local sources in fairly recent times. Among these are "The Hag of Red River" (Robertson County), "Cousin Freebody's Last Praying" (Cumberland County), and several others that in themselves reveal their places of origin.

Others of these stories follow folk tale patterns that are almost universal, though background and manner of telling may be entirely local. "Young Melvin," a narrative of the simple lad who proves himself shrewder than the cunning rogue, has several parallels in old British and European folk tales. This is true also of "Mammy Wise" and "A Real Hunk of Dreaming." "Fool-Killing Shep Goins" is a version of the fool-killer theme found in folk tales from New England to the Southwest. Sev-



eral of the Negro stories included in this volume are Tennessee versions of tales also popular in neighboring states and perhaps throughout the South. "Pompey an de Lawd" and "De Ways of de Wimmens" are examples.

Finally, there are whoppers. They are simply a plotless series of wild exaggerations. Though they are the most frequently heard of all Liars' Bench stories, only two pure examples—"Snake Country" and "Pretty Baby"—have been included. Two considerations dictated this limitation. Whoppers quickly grow monotonous, even when told by a master of the art. Furthermore, every story chosen for this collection has a full measure of humorous fantasy in addition to pointed narrative and character portrayal.

GOD BLESS THE DEVIL! was arranged and edited by James R. Aswell, who also contributed a great many of the stories. The other tales were collected and written down by E. E. Miller, Jennette Edwards, Lena E. Lipscomb, and Julia Willhoit. Each writer did his own research. Illustrations are by Ann Kelley of the Tennessee Art Project of the Works Projects Administration.

William R. McDaniel  
*State Supervisor*





## On the Courthouse Steps

IN A DUSTY AFTERNOON SKY THE SUN HAS paused. Heat-monkeys shimmer across the public square and the foliage of the trees on the courthouse lawn hangs in limp tatters. The distant barking of a dog and the slow voices of the loafers on the worn steps of the shady east portico sound equally remote and unreal. Time is a warm stagnant pool in which a sensible man moves as little as possible. The best thing to do is to lounge here in the shade on the courthouse steps and just talk.

Every small county seat town in Tennessee has its Liars' Bench, gathering place for the local historians, yarn-spinners, and wags. In the heat and good fellowship of the long summer afternoons, talk for the pure sake of talking blossoms at its most extravagant. At the Liars' Bench you will find lawyers and merchants, Negroes and whites, toppers and preachers, and they all know how to tell a story. They have on tongue's-tip a great store of oral literature, a vivid growing mass which has yet to receive the full recognition due it. One of the first writers to tap this rich stream was Mark Twain; much of his genius undoubtedly lay in an ability to tell faithfully what he had heard as a boy and young man when the prize talkers of the little Missouri river town of Hannibal sat around and drawled the drowsy afternoons away. In our own time those Southern regional writers who have not derived from mag-

nolia blossoms and crinoline bear marks of the Liars' Bench—among them, Erskine Caldwell, T. S. Stribling, Jesse Stuart, Jack Boone, Harry Harrison Kroll, Brainard Cheney, Emmett Gowen, and Percy Mackaye. There are strong traces in the work of William Faulkner and in the eclectic outpourings of Thomas Wolfe.

Though most Liars' Bench tales probably sprout from some kernel of fact, each teller garnishes them with fancies of his own, interpolates bits of personal experience, and borrows heavily from accounts of other events and personages about which he has a fuller stock of hearsay. Thus, a tale which originates in East Tennessee may cross the state and, after countless tellings, reach West Tennessee dressed in a wholly different set of circumstances and with only the plot-germ intact. In its passage through space and time the story is bound to shed numerous by-versions. These, in turn, branch and re-branch and are edited and expanded by many tellers until at length dozens of stories, completely unlike in detail, have evolved from one original source.

Much of the effectiveness and distinctive flavor of Liars' Bench stories lies in the vernacular of the teller. It is a vigorous idiomatic speech, deep-rooted in the past but still possessing the youthful flexibility that characterized Elizabethan English. Because the parts of speech have not become frozen and inviolable, a man freely uses verbs as nouns, nouns as verbs, adverbs and adjectives as nouns, or puts them to any other unorthodox task he chooses. Often he does so with striking effect and genuine creative power.

However, this speech is not the hodge-podge of mispronounced words and bald crippled phrasing that lettered persons with poor ears and, unfortunately, facile pens, are prone

to pass on. A good listener is soon aware of a flowing speech pattern that may be as lyrical as an Irish fairy tale or have the measured solemnity of Ecclesiastes—the metrical echo in every-day speech of the ballads, hymns, and scriptural quotations which the small town Tennessean hears from childhood on.

Liars' Bench tales are intended solely to amuse the teller and his listeners, but sociologists and students of psychology could find in them a depth of unintended meaning. At the Liars' Bench a man is relaxed; he gives his mind the reins and lets it wander where it will. Because his words will not be weighed, judged, and held against his morals or character, his stories are most apt to reveal what he really thinks about life and death, religion, and his fellow men than does his public attitude toward these things.

The value of the extravagant story as an emotional outlet is one good reason, and possibly the most powerful reason, for the survival of the Liars' Bench. A man feels that life is not so bad, after all, when without fear of reprisal he can break the laws, flout the mighty, kiss the girls, confound the wise, and dabble pleasantly in his enemies' gore—even if only in a tall story told in the shade on the courthouse steps on a blistering summer day.

*James R. Aswell*



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*Raring Around with the Boys*





## *Young Melvin*

AFTER HIS PAPPY PASSED ON YOUNG MELVIN decided he wanted to travel. He'd always lived back at the forks of the creek and he hadn't ever at no time been farther from there than the crossroads.

So Young Melvin put out the fire and hid the ax and skillet and called up his hound named Bulger and he was on his way. He went over the hill and a good piece further and he come to the crossroads. He went straight to Old Man Bill Blowdy's house there. He knocked on the door.

Old Man Bill Blowdy come to the door and stuck his nose out the crack. "Who's there?" says he, not daring to come out for fear it was somebody he'd beat in some deal.

"It's me," says Young Melvin. "Just me and my hound dog Bulger."

Old Man Bill Blowdy opened the door then and gave Young

Melvin a sly look. "Come in and rest and eat a bite," he says, faint-like.

He was a great big fat red man that was always grinning and easy talking, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. And he was just about the slickest, double-dealingest old cooter in the country or anywhere else at all. Nobody could beat him in a deal—never had, anyway—or when it come to a law-suit. Always lawing somebody, Old Man Bill Blowdy was.

"Why don't you come in, Young Melvin?" he says.

"Because I'm on my way, Mister Old Man Bill Blowdy. I'm a-going to town for sure. It's forty miles and across two counties but I aim to see that town. That's why I come to see you."

Old Man Bill Blowdy started shutting the door. "Now, now, Young Melvin," he says. "I'm hard up for money right now. I couldn't loan my sweet mother, now in heaven praise be, so much as a penny."

"I don't want no money," says Young Melvin. "I ain't the borrowing kind."

So Old Man Bill Blowdy poked his head out again. "What can I do for you then?"

"Well, it's like this. You're my twenty-third cousin, my only kin in this world. I got a favor for you to do for me."

Old Man Bill Blowdy started sliding that door shut. "No, no favors. I make it a rule to do no favors and don't expect none from nobody."

"It's a favor I'm aiming to pay for," says Young Melvin.

"Oh," says Old Man Bill Blowdy, opening the door once more, "that's different now. Come right in, Young Melvin."

"No sir, no need to come in, for I'd just be coming out again. What I want you to do is keep my fox hound Bulger

while I'm off on my travels. I'll pay his keep, I'll pay what's right when I come back to get him."

Old Man Bill Blowdy grinned all over his face. He thought he saw a way to make himself something extry or get him a fox hound one. Everybody knew Young Melvin was simple. Honest as the day's long but simple.

"Why yes," says Old Man Bill Blowdy. "Why yes, I'll keep Bulger for you, Young Melvin, and glad to."

So Young Melvin gave his hound dog over and bid Old Man Blowdy farewell. "I'll be back next week or month or sometime. I don't know how long it'll be, for it's forty miles and across two counties to town."

Well, one day the week or month or anyhow sometime after that, here come Young Melvin down the pikeroad to the cross-roads, limping and dusty and easy in mind. He went straight to Old Man Bill Blowdy's house and knocked his knuckles on the door.

Old Man Bill Blowdy stuck his nose out the crack and says, "Who's there?"

"It's me, it's Young Melvin."

"How are you, Young Melvin?"

"Fair to piddling. I walked to town and saw all the sights and then walked back here again. Forty miles and across two counties. Don't never want to roam no more. I'm satisfied now."

Old Man Bill Blowdy started shutting the door. "Glad to hear it, Young Melvin. Next time you come down to the cross-roads, drop in and say hello. Any time, just any time, Young Melvin."

"Hold there! Wait a minute!" says Young Melvin.

"I'm busy," says the old man.



But Young Melvin got his foot in the door. "How about Bulger, Old Man Bill Blowdy? How about him?"

Old Man Bill Blowdy kept trying to shut the door and Young Melvin kept shoving his foot in.

"See here!" says Young Melvin. "I mean my fox hound."

"Oh him? Why, I declare to my soul I'd almost forgot that hound dog, Young Melvin. I sure almost had."

"Where is he at?" says Young Melvin, still trying to keep the old man from closing the door.

"I'll tell you," says Old Man Bill Blowdy, still trying to shut it, "I feel mighty bad about it, Young Melvin, but your Bulger is no more."

"Howcome? What do you mean?"

"Why, he's perished and gone, Young Melvin. The first night after you left I sort of locked him up in that little busted-down house over in the Old Ground. Well sir, Young Melvin, those last renters of mine that lived there was powerful dirty folks. They left the place just lousy with chinch bugs. Them bugs was mortal hungry by this time. So they just eat that Bulger of yours alive. Eat all but the poor thing's bones by morning—and the bones was pretty well gnawed.

"It was my fault in one way. I ought to known better than put your dog in there, Young Melvin. But I done it. So I won't charge you a penny for his keep the night I had him. I aim to do the fair thing."

Well, Old Man Bill Blowdy stuck his sly eye to the crack of the door to see how Young Melvin was taking it. He knew the boy was simple. He figured he had him. Because Old Man Bill Blowdy had Bulger hid out and he aimed to swap him for something to a man he knew in the next county.

So Young Melvin stood there looking like the good Lord had



shaken him off His Christian limb. Tears come in his eyes and he sleeved his nose. "That dog was folks to me," he says. "Them chinch bugs don't know what they done to me."

He pulled his foot out of the door and he backed down the steps. He started towards home.

Old Man Bill Blowdy eased out on the porch to watch him go.

About that time Young Melvin turned around. "Mister Old Man Bill Blowdy," he says, "my place is way over the hill and a good piece further. I'm beat out and tired. Wonder if you'd loan me your mule to ride on? I'll bring it back tomorrow."

The old man knew Young Melvin was honest as the live-long day. Besides, he was so tickled with how he'd got him a good hound to swap and it not costing anything that he just called across the way to the crossroads store and got a witness to the loan and let Young Melvin take the mule. It was a fine mule, too, with the three hind ribs showing, the best sort of sign in a mule—shows he's a hard worker.

Next morning Young Melvin never showed up and Old Man Bill Blowdy got worried. He got worrieder still in the middle of the day when no sign of Young Melvin did he see.

But along about afternoon he saw Young Melvin come walking over the hill and down towards the crossroads. He run out on his porch and yelled, "Hey, Young Melvin, where's my mule?"

Young Melvin kept walking. He just shook his head. "I feel mighty bad about that mule, Mister Old Man Bill Blowdy," he called. "I sure do."

"Hey! Wait there!"

But Young Melvin went on, heading for the store at the crossroads.

So Old Man Bill Blowdy was so mad he didn't wait to get

his shoes. He just jumped off the porch and run across to Square Rogers, that good old man's house up the road a ways.

"Square," he says, "I want you to handle Young Melvin. He stole my mule."

The Square waked up his deputy and the deputy went down and brought in Young Melvin. Everybody at the crossroads come tagging along behind.

Square said, "Son, they tell me you stole a mule."

"No sir, Square Rogers, I never done it," says Young Melvin.

Old Man Bill Blowdy stomped his bare feet and shook his fists. "He's a bald-faced liar!"

"Curb yourself down, Old Man Bill Blowdy," says the Square, "and let the boy tell his side. Go ahead, Young Melvin."

So Young Melvin told his side, told how he borrowed the mule and started for home. "Well," he says, "you know I live over the hill and a good piece further. I rode that mule to the top of the hill. I was minding my own business and not giving nobody any trouble. Then all on a sudden I see a turkey buzzard dropping down out of the sky. Here it come, dropping fast and crowing like a game rooster.

"First thing I knew that old buzzard just grabbed Old Man Bill Blowdy's mule by the tail and started heaving and the mule's hind legs lifted off the ground and I went flying over his head and hit a rock head-on. I failed in my senses a minute. When I could see straight, I saw that buzzard sailing away with the mule, most a mile high and getting littler all the time.

"And that's how it happened. I sure am sorry, but there ain't much you can do with a thing like that, Square."

"Hold on there!" says Square Rogers, that good old man. "I've seen many a turkey buzzard in my time, Young Melvin, but never a one that could crow."

"Well," says Young Melvin, "it surprised me some too. But in a county where chinch bugs can eat up a full-grown fox hound in one night, why I just reckon a turkey buzzard has a right to crow and fly off with a mule if he wants to."

So it all come out and Square Rogers, that good old man, made Old Man Bill Blowdy fork up Bulger and then Young Melvin gave back the mule.

Old Man Bill Blowdy was mocked down to nothing. He just grieved and pined away and it wasn't no more than ten years before he taken sick and wasted away and died.

*James R. Aswell*





### *A Real Hunk of Dreaming*

EVERYBODY SAID BULL RUNNELS HAD OUGHT to be bored for the simples.

First time they said it, he was still just a young'un, about fourteen year old but even then as big as a man. People got to noticing how he clumb to the top of every tall tree he come around and would set up there for minutes at a time craning his neck in all directions.

"What on earth are you doing, boy?" they asked.

"A-looking at the weather," says he. "You can see heap more of it up here."

*Raring Around with the Boys*

So they shaken their heads and started saying, "That Runnels boy ought to be bored for the simples!"

Looked like that boy just never did aim to stop growing. Why, when he was eighteen he was easy the biggest man in town. He could tote a bigger load and do more downright back-breaking work than any two buck niggers in the county. His real name was Willie, but who's going to call a big strapping six-foot-four two-hundred-pounder a name like *Willie*? No, it was Bull Runnels—had to be Bull, that's all.

Ben Canada was the blacksmith and he kept spying his eyes after Bull Runnels. "Look at them shoulders!" says he. "Look at them arm muscles a-working like a mess of eels! He'll make a master blacksmith, that boy!" So Ben Canada taken Bull Runnels on to be his helper and started training him.

Nobody ever saw his beat when he got started. He made that old anvil ring till it shaken every window in town and sounded like a steeple full of big iron bells. When he got busy bending horseshoes or hammering out wagon springs or axles, the inside of that blacksmith shop looked like hell on a busy day, with flames shooting every which way and sparks flying like red-hot sleet.

Bull was too busy now to climb trees and look at the weather. When he wasn't hammering hot iron, he was sleeping or setting on his heels out behind Ben Canada's shop in the chicken yard listening to the hens.

"I got a theery," he says, "and it's about chickens. Now, chickens is clever if you get to know them good. I figger they can talk like anybody else, only we can't make it out. I got a theery if I just use around the coop a-listening long enough I'll get to where I can understand them. Now, that would be a reel novelty!"

So people said they *knowed* Bull Runnels had ought to be bored for the simples.

Bull never could get the hang of chicken talk, so he give it up, and pretty soon something else was working on his mind.

"I hear folks all the time talking about dreaming," says he, "but me now, I ain't never had one of them things. Don't even know what one feels like. Just close my eyes and—*pop!*—I'm a goner. Next thing I know it's time to go to work again. Nothing happens but plain nothing in between. Now, I sure would like to have one of them things just once, just so's I could say I'd had it."

Ben Canada says, "Shucks, Bull, dreams don't amount to so much. Some's good and some's bad, but mostly they're bad."

Was always two or three men hanging around the shop to watch Bull work and somebody'd say, "Aw shoot, Ben, you know that ain't so. Don't listen to him, Bull."

Bull would lay his hammer down and push the long hair out of his eyes and say, "Now looky-here, boys! Don't you go short-talking Mister Ben like that. I'll tromp somebody's britches if you don't watch out, now!"

"Calm down there, Bull," they'd say, ready to cut and run if a mean streak hit him. "We don't mean no harm. We was aiming to say they're a lot of dreams that's gay to have."

"Says which?" Bull would get all interested.

"Well," they'd tell him, "some eating dreams is first rate. Maybe you dream all night you're eating. Maybe it's spare-ribs and beaten biscuit, buttermilk and gravy and peach dump-lings."

"How about chittlins, now?"

"Chittlins, too. Just anything. You eat all night and never get full. A big fat nigger always ready to heap the grub on

your plate! Ice cream and pie and stripe candy—the more you eat, the more they feed you when you're dreaming."

Bull would set down and put his head in his hands. "Aw me! I sure wish I could have a dream, now! I sure do, now!"

"That ain't all, neither," they'd say. "You dream about pretty gals, too."

"Sure enough?" Bull says. He was awful timid around the ladies, Bull was. All he could do was stand and blush and grin around them. So now he looked sly and says, "What *kind* of gal dreams?"

"Aw," they told him, "you know. All the pretty gals love you and you hug them all and buss them good. Stuff like that."

"*Whoo-ee!*" says Bull, jumping up and grabbing a hot bar of iron out of the charcoal furnace and banging it with his hammer till the anvil danced a jig. "I sure would like to have one of them gal dreams, now!"

Slim Loggins—Lawyer Loggins, his boy Slim—was the ring-leader when it come to telling Bull about dreaming. He had a gift for it. He could tell a dream to where it sounded better than heaven's rest to a damned soul.

"Yes sir, Bull," he'd say, "everything you've ever wanted to do, don't matter what it is, you do it when you dream. The whole world's yours. All you have to do is reach out and grab it. Say you dream of money. Why, man, you find it in piles! Yes sir, big stacks of bright shiny dollars! You can just rake it in, shovel it in a wagon, and haul it away."

"Can you keep the money?" says Bull.

"Sure you can."

"Aw me!" moans Bull. "And I can't dream nohow at all. Aw me!"

Everybody in town knew how hard Bull Runnels was try-

ing to dream. Ben Canada's old woman told about it. Bull lived in the Canadas' back room and they heard him at it.

"With him grunting and groaning and doing around like he does," says old Mrs. Canada, "we don't get any rest hardly, me and Ben. First he bounces up and down till it sounds like the bed's going to fall to pieces. Then he quiets down some and just about the time we're dropping off he lets out a snort and says, 'Dad-fetch it, start a-going, dreams!'

"Then he starts a-mumbling and saying, 'Aw me! Aw me!' and bouncing and blowing till we think he ain't never liable to quit. It goes on and on like that. All of a sudden, along about midnight, he bubbles two or three times and starts snoring peaceful as a baby. Me and Ben don't get a wink till then, neither."

Slim Loggins tells Bull, "Trouble is, you got too good a digestion. If you eat nails, they wouldn't bother you."

"I never et no nails that I know of," Bull says.

"What I mean," Slim tells him, "is that you ought to eat something that will give your stummick fits. That's the best way to have a dream."

Bull would scratch an ear and ask, "What ought I to eat, then? I eat everything a-going now, but I don't never have no dreams."

"Well," says Slim, "why don't you eat some pig knuckles, chittlins, and sourkraut with plenty of vinegar. Then eat a mess of catfish and some bananas and ice cream and mince pie. Eat lots of each thing and see what happens."

"Reckon I'll have one of them gal dreams?" says Bull.

"You ought to have some kind," Slim says.

Bull kind of twists his blacksmith's apron and grins. "You mind if I dream about your gal, Slim? I mean Birdie, now."



Slim looked funny. Birdie was Doc Nugent's daughter and the prettiest bouncing blue-eyed gal in town. But he says, "Why, naw. You go ahead and dream about whoever you want to."

"I sure thank you," says Bull. "I sure do, now."

So Bull went and eat slathers of all that stuff and went home and slept like a log. He didn't dream a thing.

Next day he told the boys, "It just ain't any use. 'Tain't in me to have one of them things. Aw me!"

Slim Loggins got all the boys together at Sneed's drugstore one night. He says, "I figger it's high time to do something about Bull Runnels."

"What can anybody do about Bull Runnels?" they said.

"Hold quiet and I'll tell you. I'll get Birdie to slip out one of Doc's prescription blanks. I'll write some scratchy-looking stuff all over it and tell Bull it's for medicine that will make him dream sure. When Bull brings it over, Doc Sneed here will give him a bottle of baby-soother—you game, Doc?"

Doc Sneed says, "Reckon so, sure. No harm, I reckon."

"All right. Well, Bull will go home and drink the whole bottle and lay down to dream. That baby-soother will work on him. When he's helpless, we'll just slip in his window, all dressed in sheets, and tie him up, heist him out the window, and carry him over into the woods.

"Then we'll really fix him up, boys! Nothing that'll really damage him, of course. Nope, just a regular little old initiation like we give at the lodge. He'll be so dope-headed with that soothing syrup he won't hardly know what's happening. We'll lay it to him to a fare-you-well, then take him home. In the morning he'll be sore behind and scared in the head. I'm willing to bet good money he won't want no more dreams. And

what's more, he'll quit this everlasting talk about it. How's it strike everybody?"

They all said the idea was a ripper. So they set around laughing and planning out just what they aimed to do to Bull Runnels to cure him from craving a dream.

"One thing, though," says Slim. "Don't nobody ever let on to Bull about what really happened. He gets tempered up easy and when that happens he'll crack bones like kindling wood. The man that gives us away will have the rest of us to whip as well as Bull."

In a day or two Slim Loggins and some of the boys went down to the blacksmith shop. They told Bull Runnels about this sure-fired dream medicine Doc Nugent was putting out.

"If you want to try it," says Slim, pulling out the blank he'd hen-scratched all over, "here's the prescription. Doc Sneed can fill it for you."

Bull dropped his hammer to the ground and reached for that piece of paper. He held it up and admired it like he was seeing visions already.

"Slim," he says, "do you reckon it will reelly work, now? Reckon if I take it I'll have one of them dreams, sure enough?"

"Why," Slim tells him, "can't be no doubt about it! Do you think a fine man like Doc Nugent would go passing out medicine that won't work?"

Bull scratched his ear and says no, that wasn't likely because Doc was a mighty fine man. Then he grinned and looked sly. "Doc sure has got one more pretty gal! Birdie's a reel baby doll, now!"

Slim didn't like that. He looked cross and says, "You'll have a real hunk of a dreaming, Bull. I garntee *that*!"

When it was good dark, Slim and the boys got together and



waited around till by their judgment the baby-soother had got in its licks. Everybody well knowed that Bull Runnels bedded early.

About a little after eight Slim says, "Well, let's go. Bull's pounding it hard by now."

With him leading, the boys stole around behind Ben Canada's house, all trying to keep from busting out with the heehaws.

Life is a funny place sometimes. Most anybody who'd drunk that whole bottle of baby-soother would have been dead to the world. But, somehow, it didn't operate to amount to much on Bull Runnels. No, he was just laying on his back in bed feeling a little drowsy and faraway.

"Maybe," says he, "this is the way you feel when you're a-fixing to dream. Maybe I'm just before fetching out one of them things, now."

He rolled over facing to the window. Then he blinked his eyes. "Here she starts, sure enough!" he thinks.

Coming through the window he sees some white floppy things. "Must be a dream," he thinks, "because I've been a-living all my life and ain't never laid eye on nothing like that. Well, now I'm a-dreaming, I might as well start in."

So he hopped out of bed in his nightshirt and grabbed hold of the white things and chunked them out the window. "Go way," says he. "I ain't studying to dream about old white nothings like you! It's eating dreams and gal and money dreams I'm after."

Sheets with two pair of legs each were flying every which way when Bull Runnels clumb out his window in his nightshirt. "I reckon," says he, watching them go in the dimmishness, "that them is what you call nightmares."

By the time Bull got out in front of the house, not a sheet

could he see. Pretty scared, they'd scattered to their own houses. Slim Loggins was mad enough to destroy creation, but he knowed better than face Bull Runnels. So he threwed his sheet away and stomped over to set awhile with Birdie.

Bull Runnels didn't know what to do next. He stood in the middle of the road scratching his ear and wool-gathering. "Dad-fetch it, now!" he says. "Ain't hardly reasonable for me to have them three kinds of dreams at once. Couldn't get much reel satisfaction out trying to eat and buss a pretty gal and pick up money at the same time. It would be a mess, if you ask me. All right then, we'll see, now."

He picked up a flat rock and spit on it. He called that side heads and the dry side tails and flipped it to see which way to take his dreams.

"Eats first," says he, "then money, then the pretty gal dream."

Straight away he loped down to the square in his bare feet with his nightshirt switching around his big hairy legs. He made for Tom's Dandy Eats, the best place in town to get a meal.

It was late and wasn't a soul in Tom's Dandy Eats except Tom himself. Tom lets out a howl when Bull comes in. "Bull Runnels!" he says. "What the devil ails you?"

Bull looked him in the eye and pointed his finger. "Don't give me no trouble, Mister Tom," he says, "or I'll churn your head. I'm having a dream of eating and the mouth juice is about to choke me, now. So hump yourself, Mister Tom. Whatever you got that's hot. Don't matter. Just so's they's a plenty of it."

"Who's going to pay? I ask you, Bull Runnels?"

"Why, don't act so crazy, Mister Tom!" says Bull. "This is a dream. Everything's free in a dream. Make haste, now. They's piles of silver dollars and a pretty little gal a-waiting to be dreamt."

Here's the way it was. Tom had heard some talk when the boys were eating with him. So he figgered it out in a wink and vowed to himself he'd make them pay for whatever Bull put away. So he just loaded the table down.

Bull slapped his stomach, grabbed a knife, and started shoveling. Eat two pounds of steak and half a ham butt. Eat four helpings of fried potatoes, a plate of brains and eggs, some cabbage and turnip greens, some batter cakes and sorghum-lasses and butter, soda biscuits, corn pone, lamb fries, and washed it all down with sweetmilk and coffee.

In about an hour he pushed back his chair and wiped his mouth on his nightshirt tail. "Ah Lordy!" says he. "I sure dreampt a good un!"

Next Bull tried to get into the bank but couldn't. "Dog-gone!" he says. "They didn't tell me you had locks in dreams! But they sure got them on the bank."

So then he cut over to Doc Sneed's drugstore and walked in.

When Doc viewed him he got scared, thought Bull was coming after him for being in on the joke. He backed up against the wall and pled, "Don't do it, Bull! I didn't mean nothing by it! Swear to God I didn't, Bull!"

Bull just gawped at him. "Doc," he says, "you sure act funny in a dream. I wish you'd quit shaking and come over here and show me how to open this cash register. I push these little stick-out things?"

"Aw, you ain't going to raid the till, Bull!"

"Why no," says Bull, filling a sack with change and bills. "I'm just having my money dream, now."

It was fair killing Doc Sneed to watch it. Must've been anyhow fourteen or fifteen dollars in the till. But he knowed better than tell Bull it was a joke. If he believed it, Bull might've

wrecked the place pretty near. Doc was madder than Tucker the day his dog died, but he couldn't do a thing about it.

"Thank you kindly, Doc," says Bull. "Much obliged for the money dream."

And then he went back to Ben Canada's and clumb in the back window and stashed the sack of change and bills.

"Now," says he, "for the pretty gal dream! *Whoo-ee!*" He poured half a bottle of sweet hair oil over his bushy head, clumb out the window, and started for Birdie Nugent's house. He was in a big way, feeling mighty bobbish, and he walked like a man stepping over cornstalks, with his head in the air and his nightshirt waving around his legs.

So happened that old Doc Nugent was away from home on a night call and his old lady had gone to bed. Slim Loggins and Birdie were sweethearting on the sofa in the parlor.

Bull come up on the piazza in his quiet bare feet. He stood there peeking in, grinning, and clucking. "Ah Lordy!" says he, "that Birdie! Pretty as a spotted pup!"

First thing Slim or Birdie knowed, Bull had hauled off and come bulging in the front door. "Hi there, Miss Birdie!" says he.

Birdie screeched and Slim near swallowed his neck-bean. Slim jumped behind the sofa in a sweat panic. Birdie stood up, pale as death, and her knees about to jack-knife under her.

"Here I am, little hossfly!" says Bull. Then he picks Birdie up like a baby and sets on the sofa with her on his knee. But Birdie didn't know about it. She gave a little cheep and then she mere fainted away.

"Buss me, hossfly," says Bull, and he gave her a big old smack right square on the mouth. "*Whoo-ee!*" says he. "You're good enough to eat, now!"

He started patting her head with his big hand like you'd pat the flank of a horse. He didn't notice a thing—neither that Birdie'd swooned out or that Slim Loggins was crawling on his belly over by the wall towards the grate. Didn't see Slim get the poker.

"Little Birdie gal," says Bull, "a man couldn't want no better dream than you. Buss me again, little pistol."

So Bull didn't see Slim behind the sofa, gritting his jaws like he could chew the edge off a cold chisel. He didn't see that poker in both Slim's hands and blood in Slim's eye. Didn't see it coming down like a jag of blue lightning.

The poker landed so hard it just jarred the house. Bull Runnels started leaning over sort of slow. Slim caught up Birdie, and Bull slid out on the floor, dead to the world.

After rolling Bull out on the piazza, Slim brought Birdie to. He got some of the boys and they toted Bull home and dumped him in bed.

Next morning Slim and the boys drifted down to the blacksmith shop. Doc Sneed come along too. They were all kind of worried, scared Slim had maybe damaged Bull's head with the poker.

But no Lord! There was Bull hard at it bending horseshoes and making that old anvil ring like a steeple full of big iron bells.

Bull let out a bellow when he noticed the boys edging through the door. "Boys," says he, "it done the trick! That medicine give me a sure enough reel hunk of dreaming, now! I had a gal dream the sweetest ever!" Bull smacked his lips and rolled his eyes.

"Yep," says Bull, "made me fifteen dollars and seventy-seven cents in my money dream, and I won't never forget the



eating dream. I'm satisfied now, though. Don't want to dream no more ever, now. It gives you too big a headache when you wake up."

So everybody just looked at him. Doc Sneed was out his money, Slim had had his best gal bussed, and the lot of them had to chip in and pay a big feed bill at Tom's Dandy Eats.

So Slim Loggins cocked his eye at the roof and stuck his hands in his pockets. "Boys," says he, "I ain't so sure about *who* ought to be bored for the simples now."

*James R. Aswell*





### *Cousin Freebody's Last Praying*

WHEN IT COME TO PRAYING, COUSIN FREEBODY Tillman just couldn't be beat—or stopped, neither, till he'd prayed his self out. When he got up to pray, everybody at Pilgrim Beauty Church House knowed they was in for a spell of squirming, because Cousin Freebody cried aloud and spared none.

He had a special kind of slow solemn way to get down on his knees. He'd turn his round red face up towards the rafters and give a sweet smile in the Lord's direction. Then he'd pull at his white chinbrush two or three times and sail in. "Oh Looord, oh Looord," he'd say, each time a mite louder. "Oh Looord, this is Freebody Tillman asking you to send the Holy Spirit down upon them whiskey-making Barfieldses! Oh Looord, drive out the demons from the heart of pore Della Creasy, for she's been galavanting around and got herself in a fix.

"Oh Looord," he'd beller, "who is beknöwing to all things,

clean with them holy hands of yores the vile hands of them that charges two prices for brought-on goods that they got half price at the county seat. You know who I mean." And he'd open one eye and look at Storekeeper Boshears.

That's why they all called him Cousin Freebody, when he wasn't nobody's cousin at all. Cousin-like, he knowed everybody's business and was just dying to tell it around. Yes, when he got warmed up praying, Cousin Freebody would run right through the community, naming names and telling what they'd done against the teaching of the Book since last meeting night.

Cousin Freebody left his own self to the tag end. "Oh Looord," he says, "bless thy humble servant that calls yore attention to these here sinners. Send yore holy lamb to bless his mission of righteousness, oh Looord, *Amen!*" Then he'd get off his knees, looking mighty satisfied and proud of his self.

Some said it wasn't right the way Cousin Freebody taken on his self to tell the Lord all such things in public. But some claimed it was a genuwine service to the community. Both sides argued back and forth and Cousin Freebody kept right on pointing the sinners out every chance he got to pray.

Old Hub Peegrum lived joining farms to Cousin Freebody and knowed him might near as well as anybody, or maybe better. "You know," he says, "it's a queer thing to me that them Freebody Tillmanses will eat possum, come any season, and any fool knowing possum ain't good only from frost till Easter. Why, I've seen the meat on the platter, and it don't have that greasy look that possum meat does. It's sort of pink and all lean like—well, it just *couldn't* be sheep meat, because Cousin Freebody don't raise sheep. But I will say it's the sheepest-looking possum meat ever I seen!"

You could take it or leave it. Old Hub Peegrum hadn't put

his self on no limb, but it did set folks to thinking. They got to thinking about the way the farmers had been missing lambs and couldn't figger what was going with them.

Far and near the folks begun talking about Cousin Freebody's sheepy-looking possum meat. Some of them says to him, "What kind of possum is that you folks eat, Cousin Freebody?"

"Regular old simmon tree possum, brother," says Cousin Freebody. "Eats good, too. I've eat so much possum, reckon you might say I'm half a possum my own self."

It didn't take the wind out of *his* sails none at all. If anything, he prayed louder and spilled other people's sins out in public harder than ever. His "Oh Looords" got to be so long that some said he counted up to ten in his mind before he'd turn one aloose.

One reason Cousin Freebody got away with all he did was the way he could pray up a rain. Just let it come a drouth and there'd be a special prayer service for rain. By the time Cousin Freebody had got through his prayer, wasn't no need of nobody else trying. Wasn't nothing else left to promise the Lord if he sent rain. So the meeting would break up and the crowd go home. Most usually by that time the sun would be gone behind a cloud. All the womenfolks would go home and get the rain barrels and tubs out, for they knowed that rain was sure coming.

Some that read their almanacs said they noticed Cousin Freebody seemed to pick out the days to pray for rain when the signs were right for it. Some said so to his face.

But Cousin Freebody just laughed. "Well, anyhow," says he, "it *did* rain, didn't it? Almanac or no almanac, you don't see it raining after anybody else prays, do you?"

He had them *there*.

Cousin Freebody not only prayed, but he was likewise visited by visions.

"Didn't a white dog come sneaking out from under Malinda's bed one night and didn't I try to kick it out the door, because Malinda wouldn't have no such truck as a dog in the house, let alone under a body's bed, and didn't my foot go clean through that hant, and didn't it just sort of fade away without going out the door nor nothing? And, of course, it wasn't no time till Malinda taken with pneumonia fever and died.

"That was a warning for certain," Cousin Freebody would say. "And furthermore than that, I see visions the times I pray for sinners. Yes, the Lord sends me signs, and the sinners most always get converted."

The way Cousin Freebody got warnings and had his prayers answered gave lots of people the all-overs and brought heaps of them to the mourners' bench. But there was one time when Cousin Freebody's vision wasn't just what he bargained for.

The regular Wednesday night prayer meeting was being held over at the Edwardses away across the ridge, and Cousin Freebody and Old Hub Peegrum went over together. On the way, Cousin Freebody said it would be weathering before long, because he had heard a hoot owl hooting that day.

"It's not a sign of weathering," says Hub Peegrum, "to hear a hoot owl, but just them whiskey-making Barfieldses signaling somebody's coming towards their still. Some day," he says, "you'll find out all them signs you go by don't hold water, Cousin Freebody."

Now that didn't set well with Cousin Freebody—Old Hub's belittling his signs and visions. So he just puffed and blowed, mad as a hornet, all the rest of the way to the meeting.

The womenfolks were there in the parlor and each one had



their Bible and songbook and fan. The menfolks were chewing tobacco and smoking out in the yard till Cousin Freebody come in. Then they followed him inside to begin the meeting.

"Cousin Freebody must have a powerful good speaking or something on his mind tonight," everybody says. "He never

stopped to swap gossip with the men outside like always. Just come right on in."

"Pears to me," somebody says, "he looks sort of unusually pious too, or else something's troubling his mind a plenty. Maybe another one of them visions he talks about."

The song services ended with them all joining in on "When I Shall See Him Face to Face," and Cousin Freebody got ready to pray. Down on both knees, face lifted to high heaven, hands folded.

"Oh, Looord! Oh Lord Almighty God! You who are be-knowing to our every need. Oh Looord, send a vision to these sinful people. Something as a token, Lord, to thy faithful servant for telling you all these things these folks been doing all these years. Oh, Loooord, one of our deacons don't believe in warn-ings from thy holy hand. Lord, just a little vision to them as needs it most is all I'm asking."

Somebody giggled from over next to the wall where the young bucks was setting with their girls. Cousin Freebody cocked one eye open to see how Old Hub's face was looking. Everybody was bound to know the prayer for a vision was aimed at Hub, the doubting deacon.

And that was the downfall of Cousin Freebody, opening that one eye. If he hadn't done it, likely nothing would have happened. But he did.

He sprung up with both eyes wild and he threw his arms out in front of him like he was trying to push away the devil his self.

"Almighty God, remove this evil vision from me!" he howled. "I'll pay Tom Edwards and Hub Peegrum for every last lamb of theirs I et and told it was possum. Almighty God, this ain't the little lamb I et today, you done made a mistake, Lord, it



was a young ewe I et today. Oh God Almighty, stop the pitiful bleating of that poor little stolen lamb of Hub's I et last week! Oh, Loooooord—!"

And there it was, out before God and everybody else what he'd been doing.

Everybody was laughing so hard, and Cousin Freebody howling so loud that Tom Edwards' house near shaken down.

"It ain't no vision, Cousin Freebody!" Tom kept yelling at him. "It's a little pet lamb of Nancy's. A lamb that's been raised up in the house and taken a notion to stroll in. It ain't no vision, Cousin Freebody."

Well, when Cousin Freebody seen what he'd done to his self, he lost his religion. He waved his arms and raved, "You ornery razor-backed, throat-cutting, whiskey-drinking bastards can have all the meetings you want to from now on, but I won't be there to help you. Anybody that would make a poor old man



think he was getting such a bushwhacking from the Holy Spirit is worthless as frog spit!"

He stomped towards the door, but stopped long enough to say, "And as for you, Tom Edwards, anybody that'd stoop to raising sheep in the house ain't fitten for even a sheep thief to associate with."

And Cousin Freebody never went to another meeting and never prayed again.

*Julia Willhoit*

## *To the Last Breath of Fight*



WHEN HULETT CROSSWAY BOUGHT A LOCOMOBILE it made some stir up and down Painter Creek. Hulett had always been such a fancier of fine hoss-flesh that most folks point blank wouldn't believe it. They said it was a slander on Hulett.

But they mighty soon saw for themselves. Old Hulett lived at Springhead with his wife and five boys and four girls and their families, and every day now down Valley Road in his Locomobile he went. Yes, on down Painter Creek Valley County Road and back *up* Valley Road, sometimes in his Locomobile, sometimes afoot, Old Hulett went every day.

All up and down Painter Creek folks was a-gaping and a-blistering. They'd run and hang out the cabin doors watching the Locomobile busting down Valley Road, with its brass radiator shining and steaming and its polished leather top straps winking in the sunlight. And Old Hulett sticking his white-

whiskered head out the side ever so often to yell "Gee!" or "Haw!" or "Whoa!"

Days when he went back afoot, the Locomobile would be somewhere down the road. Somtimes it would be upside down in a ditch, sometimes a wheel would be off. Sometimes it just set there in the road, with nothing wrong a body could see, but all Valley folks knowed there was *something* wrong.

Old Hulett would tramp back to Springhead and gather his sons and his sons-in-laws. Then the whole passel of Crossways and in-laws would stem back down the road to where the Locomobile was stuck. There'd be grunting and heaving and swearing and working. Sometimes they was at it till long after nightfall, but they always got the Locomobile back to Springhead before daybreak. And next day Old Hulett would steam down again.

Valley folks was between a sweat and a stew. Nobody knowed what to make of it. And nobody wanted to ask Old Hulett, he was such a funny old cooter.

"Old Crossway's just gone rank loony!" some said.

But others said, "Ain't nothing so strange about it," they said. "Course, it *is* a little mite queer that he'd go so far as to buy one of them ungodless things. But everybody in Painter Creek Valley knows that Hulett goes to town every year about this time. And they likewise know that he gits lickered up, stays a week, and then comes home and stays drunk two weeks before he commences to sober up. How about them other things he's done lots of other times when he was on a bust? How about the time he was going to teach his hoss Dicker to walk a rail fence and the hoss broke his leg and had to be shot? Well, this ain't no bit stranger, and in another week it all will be over. Old Hulett's been at home just one week now and he

must be still drunk as a hoot owl. One more week and it's over. You'll see."

Both sides was wrong, as they found out right soon.

Luther Lee Tidwell was driving his team and wagon *up* Valley Road next morning, and here comes Old Hulett's Locomobile *down* Valley Road, with the radiator steaming and red dust and black smoke clouding the road behind it. Now, Luther Lee'd figgered this might happen, and he was out on the road two hours earlier than the regular time Old Hulett made his run down the road. But all the same here came Hulett, hell-bound. About a hundred yards off, Old Hulett leans his head out the car and whoops, "Git out of the road!"

Luther Lee figgered on doing just that. He pulled his team hard to the right, but the sight of that snorting contraption made them skitter and buck for a bare-cut minute before they lunged off to the right.

Old Hulett seen he couldn't miss Luther Lee and stay in the road. He sings out "Gee!" at the end of his lung power and the Locomobile swung to the right. "Haw!" yells Old Hulett, still louder, but the Locomobile didn't haw. It busted square into the rail fence and stopped halfway through it.

Luther Lee's team had pulled his wagon mighty near through the fence on his side of the road, too. Rails was scattered galley-west, every which way from Sunday, and the wagon and harness all tangled up in them. The horses was kicking and raring but they couldn't go no further.

Luther Lee got his team quieted and climbed out of the wagon. His wagon was battered some and his horses skinned up and his rail fence down. He was mad.

"You gol-durned old white-whiskered billy goat!" he says. "I come out on the road two whole hours earlier just so's I

wouldn't meet you and your hell-wagon. And here you are noway! What the hell do you mean? Are you drunk?"

Old Hulett climbed out of the Locomobile, swabbing his face with a red bandana. His chin whiskers was going good now. He was working that chaw to death. He just stood there a minute chawing and rubbing sweat from his face. Then he says, in his fast high-pitched voice, but perfectly mild, "Well, I tell you now, Luther Lee, I shore am sorry. I shore am. I come out myself just two hours earlier than usual this morning, because I begun to figger this dod-danged thing wasn't never going to learn to be harnessed and handled, the way things was going. So I figgered if I come out earlier today I'd have time to make *two* trips down and up the road. I shore am sorry about yore fences, Luther Lee. I shore am. Just wait till I go git my boys and boys-in-laws and we'll fix em up for you good as new. And yore wagon, too. Just you set tight and wait. I got to git my boys anyhow to help me git my Locomobile out of the ditch and the fence."

Luther Lee could see now that Old Hulett wasn't drunk. He hadn't even had one drink. There wasn't no smell about him but chawing tobacco, and dog fennel, and the faintish smell of lye soap that his old woman had washed his faded blue overalls and jumper in.

So Luther Lee says, "Come and help me git my team and wagon untangled and I'll cart you up to Springhead."

And while they was riding on up the road, he pumped the old man dry. And Old Hulett answered free as the wind. He told Luther Lee how he had always notioned a body should keep up with the times and stay as near abreast as he could. And how he went in to Mountain City two weeks before aiming as usual to git drunk and stay there a week and come home

and stay drunk two weeks, when one of the first things he seen was a Locomobile coming down the street. He was so downright amazed he just run out in the street and hailed the machine and stopped it. And he asked the fellow driving all about it. He learned there wasn't but one more Locomobile in Mountain City, and it was for sale at Judson's Wagon & Buggy Store. Right there he made up his mind he had to have it. So he never got drunk at all this time, but went right direct and bought the machine and set out to break it to driving.

He told Luther Lee he had kind of a hard time learning it. "The dod-danged thing's got so many do-funnies on it," he says, "that it takes a heap of doing about to work em all at the right time.

"Like that there horn now, for instance," he told Luther Lee. "You got to grab hold of that soft black gourd and squash it in yore hand, and the horn lets out a racket like a puny little foxhorn, but lots shorter. 'Beep!' it says, like that. Well, I figger that was just an unuseless nuisance and not much good noway. So I didn't bother none about it. I just stick my head out the side and yell when somebody gits in my way.

"But," says Old Hulett, "there's other things you can't git out of working. Like that wheel, for instance, to guide you one way or another. I didn't figger that would be much trouble if I just could say 'Haw!' and pull left, or 'Gee!' and pull right, like I always done with my team. But pulling don't do no good on that wheel. You got to turn it around on that post, and seemed like I couldn't remember to do that in time. And the dod-danged thing never paid no attention to 'Haw!' or 'Gee!' Still don't for that matter.

"But," he says, "the worst thing is stopping the dod-danged machine. There's a little contraption down under yore left



foot what they call a clutch-foot-pedal, and there's one under yore right foot what they call the brake-foot-pedal. Well, to *stop* you got to push in *both* of them, haul in on yore wheel, and yell 'Whoa!' all to once. I tell you, Luther Lee, it shore is a job!"

Old Hulett went on and told Luther Lee how he spent the week in Mountain City trying to break the machine to driving, and how he banged up a few buggies and busted some store fronts and fences and had to pay for them. So the man he bought it from told him he better bring it back to Painter Creek Valley where he had plenty of space and learn it. So they loaded it on Old Hulett's team and wagon, and he brought it back to the Valley.

"And I been trying to learn the dod-danged thing to harness

and drive ever since!" says Old Hulett, biting a fresh chew. "But looks like it don't do no better. It's the contrariest thing I *ever* had dealings with! My patience is about wore out. Just one more week I'm going to try, and if it still don't come around, I'm through with the mule-headed piece of junk. I'll trade it off for a yearling colt or something like that I can break myself and bring up right. You know, Luther Lee, I figger that's what's wrong with that Locomobile. It wasn't broke in right when young."

Old Hulett chewed hard for a minute and then says, "So that's how come me out two hours earlier than usual this morning, Luther Lee. I figgered I'd be as fair as I knowed how this last week and give the durn thing *two trips* a day, stid of one. And *if* it can't learn like that, then there just ain't *no* use trying. But I shore am sorry about yore fences, Luther Lee. Me and my young'uns will fix em up for you."

Everybody in the Valley watched Old Hulett's Locomobile twice as close that last week, after Luther Lee spread the news up and down the Valley. But looked like the thing done worse instead of better. Old Hulett's boys and boys-in-laws was pretty near worked to a frazzle gitting the thing out of ditches and putting wheels back on and turning it right side up, so as Hulett would have time to make his two trips a day. The last few days they just trotted up and down the road after the Locomobile. They was all scared to ride in it.

When Saturday night came everybody knew Old Hulett was through with the Locomobile.

Saturday the thing had really acted up. It jumped, it snorted, it ran into ditches, it tore down six fences, it turned over three times. Just before sunset, when Hulett had nearly got it back up the road to Springhead the second time, it lost two wheels at



one time, the left fore and the back right. It spit a big cloud of black smoke and snorted and the engine quit dead.

There it set with the left front side down and the right back up in the air. Old Hulett shifted in his seat and the right back went down and the left front came up. Just like a see-saw, it was. Old Hulett climbed out, with the thing still see-sawing.

Then Old Hulett done something that showed everybody how mad he really was. Hulett Crossway was a man that had never been known to mistreat an animal no matter how mean or contrary it was. Folks said he had the patience of time itself in hoss-breaking and training.

He hauled off and kicked that Locomobile right square in the side.

"You dod-danged, gol-durned, mule-headed, polecat-scented cross between a cow steer and a busted wheat-thresher!" he yells. "I hope to never see you again as long as I live or die! I aim to trade you off this very night if I don't git but a sick shoat for you."

And he done just that thing. That same night. Him and his passel of boys got the wheels back on the thing and loaded it onto his team and wagon and he carted it off down the road. He swapped it to old Pluvius Talley, way the other side of the Valley, for a pied, moon-eyed heifer calf.

The whole of Painter Creek Valley heaved a sigh from end to end. "That," they says, "is the finish of Old Hulett's auto trouble, for shore now."

And it *did* seem that way for a year or so. Folks built back their fences and Old Hulett drove his team and looked like everything was as nice and settled as could be.

But these modern times—yes, these modern times kept a-slipping into Painter Creek Valley. Slipped in a little more every

year that passed. And just as sure as your modern times come into a place, a whole mess of autos can't be far behind.

So first thing anybody knowed one day an auto came a-puffing and a-snorting up Valley Road and the folks ran out and said, "Plague *on* it! Has that old toot gone and re-swapped himself back that danged Locomobile? *Could* it be?"

But no, there was no guilt on Hulett Crossway for it. It was Doc Brumitt from Mountain City in a spunk shiny new high-pocket contraption called a Chandler. And from then on, as often as once a month, here came that Chandler along Valley Road.

That busted it wide open. Seemed like it wasn't no time to speak of before nobody was surprised much to see maybe one auto a week bouncing along the road. And then it was *two* autos a week and then one a *day* and so on till a body wasn't surprised to see one of the things just any old time. It used to be when the womenfolks heard a loud bang close by it just naturally meant throw the grease in the skillet, because pappy's shot him a squirrel. Now the womenfolks just couldn't tell. Like as not a loud bang was some auto a-blowing a hole in its tire. There was many a skillet of good hog grease wasted before the womenfolks got used to it.

That's where Old Hulett Crossway came into the picture again. On a Fourth Sunday when Brother Bangs was preaching at Claybank Church-House, who should show up on the front bench but Old Hulett and him a Missionary Baptist instead of an Old Baptist like all the folks at Claybank was. He'd come there mainly because there was near a hundred in the congregation where there wasn't over a good dozen Missionaries in the whole county. He wanted a big hearing, Old Hulett did, so he set through the preaching just a-chawing his cud and

mopping his face with his red bandana. And when preaching was over and everybody was crowded out front visiting and talking, Hulett got up in the bed of his wagon and begun to elocution against autos.

"Good neighbors and friends!" he says, so shrill and high that it carried around the church-house and plumb back again. "We're all, every last one of us, free white Christian good American citizens of these here United States. We fit the dod-durned British to make this a free country. We whupped the lowland slave-drivers to set the niggers free. Yes, and right of lately we've sent our young men to fight Bill Kaiser's boys to keep the Pope of Rome from taking this free land over. So now what? *What*, I ask you?"

Then Old Hulett got red in the face, stuck his chin-whiskers right straight out, and held his arms up stiff over his head. He flung his arms wide out and yelled, "*Autos! Dod-danged contraptions! Devil-buggies!*"

Well, everybody just up and laughed at Old Hulett. Luther Lee Tidwell said, "Why, Hulett, who but you brought the first auto into Painter Creek Valley?"

"Shore I done it," said Old Hulett. "I brought that Locomobile in and didn't the Lord punish me mightily for it? You know He did. And now I stand before you, one and all, and ask you to help me drive the varmints out before they ruin us. I had the smallpox once. I don't never want to have it again. No, nor my kin nor neighbors and friends. And, folks, take it from me that knows, these here autos is worse than the smallpox *any* day!"

But the crowd just laughed and said, "*Aw*," and started breaking up.

Old Hulett begged and Old Hulett pled and when finally he did see it wasn't doing a mite of good he windmilled his arms

and yelled, "Dod-fetch you, one and all! I swear I'll do it myself."

And it wasn't no later than the next day that Old Hulett was good as his word. Yes, next day Doc Brumitt came a-bouncing over Valley Road near Springhead and before he could say "Bless Pat," first his fore left tire, then his fore right tire blowed out. And the next minute his back left tire and his back right tire went *bam—pow!* And there set his Chandler on four tires as flat and spread-out as duck feet.

So Doc had to foot it across the fields to Alvin Tuck's. He got there after awhile, but twin girls was already borned and meowing by then.

Pretty soon the star-route free deliverance mailman *he* came driving his T-whacker Ford down Valley Road, feeling proud as a dog with three tails because he'd got rid of his buggy and bought him an auto. So *he* blowed *his* tires to flinders right about where Doc Brumitt's auto was a-setting in the road.

And by the time the day begun to laten off, a good dozen autos had blowed their tires right near that same spot on the Valley Road a little piece from Springhead where Old Hulett Crossway lived. People cussed up and people cussed down and they called Old Hulett everything but a child of God. There wasn't the least bit of doubt who'd busted jars all over a stretch of Valley Road. Old Hulett had been so all-fired mad he hadn't fooled around trying to git empty fruit jars. Why no, he'd just grabbed up an armful of jars of Old Mrs. Crossway's dewberry jam and smashed them on the road. Doc Brumitt stuck his finger in the mess and tasted it and says, "It's Mrs. Crossway's jam, all right. There's nobody in Painter Creek Valley can make dewberry jam that good but Old Lady Crossway."

So then the whole community was roused up and mad. Alvin

Tuck ringleaded them in it. He said, "Look what Hulett done to me! Won't *nobody* never make *me* believe my wife would've had *twins* if Doc Brumitt had got there in time! Way I figger on it, seems like we just ought to whitecap Hulett Crossway good and plenty and learn him a lesson."

And that's just what they done to Old Hulett. Sheeted themselves up good and went over to Springhead and got Old Hulett and made him clean up every last splinter of that jar-glass. Then they took and splashed him in Painter Creek and gave him a timely warning.

That held Hulett for a year or two. Might've held him forever and all if it hadn't been for the Peddler. Now, the Peddler had him a deep-bedded two-mule wagon he used to drive into the Valley from Mountain City once every week. He piled her down with sugar and white flour, store-soap and kittles and such and swapped them to the farmer people for home-grown eggs, chickens, hams, and the like. Well, these modern times caught up with the Peddler and one day he came prospecting up Valley Road in a great big old auto with the rear end tore off and his wagon bed fastened up on it. He stopped by at Springhead to swap with Old Mrs. Crossway.

So him and her was arguing over how many pullets it took to make a teakittle when Old Hulett came up from the barn.

"How they coming, Hulett?" says the Peddler.

Old Hulett opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut so hard that his white chin-whiskers slapped him in the eyes. He stood there a-glaring at the Peddler's auto. "Where'd you git that Locomobile?" he says.

"Why," says the Peddler, "I swapped the old thing off of Pluvius Talley across the Valley and got her fixed up so's she'd run."

Well, Hulett was toting a set of harness, but when he heard where the Peddler had got the Locomobile, he just dumped that harness to the ground, throwed back his head, and howled like a stuck pig. "It's *it!*" he yelled. "It's that dod-danged man-killing crow-bait of a devil-fired Locomobile of mine!"

Then he jumped up and turned round in the air and cut out for the house after his shotgun.

The Peddler didn't tarry. He leaped in that Locomobile and skinned out in a *master* hurry. By the time he hit Valley Road, the bird shot was a-whistling and a-rattling all round him. He scattered kittles and pans and bags of flour along the road clean past Luther Lee Tidwell's. If he ever came back in that end of Painter Creek Valley he must've done it by night, because nobody never spied him there no more.

Seeing that old Locomobile just touched Old Hulett off like powder. Next day he laid wait in the bushes beside Valley Road and throwed bird-shot into every auto that drove by. He was still there, reeking with passion, when the deputies from Mountain City came scouting out for him.

So the deputies took Old Hulett Crossway in to Mountain City and Esquire Settle tried him. When Esquire Settle says, "Are you guilty or not guilty?" Hulett blowed up and raved and ranted and finally he says, "Guilty as hell, and proud of it!"

And Esquire Settle he did sentence and condemn Hulett Crossway to six months in the workhouse at hard labor.

Luther Lee Tidwell set in on the trial and brought the word back to the Valley. "It's hard on Old Hulett," says Luther, "but it will learn him a lesson. When he gits out he'll mighty well go behind his barn and have his mad fits private."

Which shows you a body never can tell.

For when Old Hulett served his sentence and got out and came back, he wasn't noway cured. If anything, he was deader against autos than ever.

He told everybody, "I'll give them things all breeds of hell to the last breath of fight in me. They can't git away with it, and you'll see, shore!"

Hulett hadn't been out a good week till one morning the autos couldn't pass the near Springhead part of Valley Road at all. There was seven barb-wire fences built across the road, a dozen strands to the fence, and the big black locust posts about three foot apart and drove three feet in the ground and packed tight with gravel-cement. It must've taken Old Hulett and all his boys and boys-in-laws all night to do that job. Anyhow, it took a road crew of ten all day to clear them seven fences off.

So out came some deputies from Mountain City and hauled Old Hulett up before Esquire Settle. And Hulett said, as proud as if he was saying he'd saved a man from drowning, "I'm guilty to the notch of my britches!" Then Esquire Settle did sentence and condemn him to eleven months and twenty-nine days at hard labor in the workhouse and Old Hulett served his term.

Folks back in the Valley sort of halfway knowed what to expect when he got out. And that made them halfway dead right. Old Hulett hadn't been home no more than long enough to change his boots before he got out with a lantern and a team of mules and plowed all night up and down, across and back, catercornered and every which way from Sunday, on the near Springhead stretch of Valley Road. He used a breaking plow and he plowed each furrow three times to the deepness of a man's knee. And then he sowed nails and staples and broken

glass and rusty wire and old jagged tin all over that plowed up mess.

Didn't any autos git past Valley Road that day. Fact is, the county was a good three days fixing Valley Road up to where even a mule could pass over it. Of course, by that time Old Hulett had been hauled in to Mountain City, and Esquire Settle had give him eighteen months' hard labor.

When time came for Hulett to git out, folks in the Valley said, "Git set! It's a-coming again!" By now these modern times was in the Valley plumb up to the hilt and everybody but the Crossways had some old sort of auto to carry them round.

Luther Lee Tidwell said, "Mark my word, Old Hulett will be back in jail inside a week's time. You can't learn an old stubborn toot like him nothing."

And that just showed how little they knowed Hulett Crossway after all them years.

Now, here's the way Hulett done in the workhouse this last spell. They call the place workhouse, but *he* was one they never *could* make turn a lick. Old Hulett wouldn't pick, he wouldn't shovel, he wouldn't move a hand. They could starve him and bully him, but it didn't matter to him. He'd just set down and stick his whiskers out and shake his head. So finally they give up trying. All Hulett done during his eighteen months was eat and sleep and chaw his plug tobacco. But inside of him he was really mighty busy. He was whetstoning his wits.

So when he got out and went home to Springhead, and the folks up and down Valley Road was between a stew and a sweat to see what he'd do next, why, it seemed like nothing was going to happen at all. It got talked around that his last jail term and what the star route rural free deliverance mailman had told Hulett had put the fear of God in him.



Soon as he got out, the star route man had gone by to see him and said, "Hulett, I'm warning you. Twice, handrunning, you've held up the U.S. mail deliverance by doing like that on Valley Road. Well, the County jailed you for it, but you got out light. Next time Uncle Sam will slap you so far in prison that if they kept yore corpse till doomsday you'd still have a hundred years to serve. So, watch yore step, Hulett."

"Thankee for nothing," says Hulett. "You scatter yore mail and I'll tend to my own business."

"I've warned you," says the star route man.

"I've told you," says Old Hulett.

Alvin Tuck says, "I believe to my soul Hulett is cured. It's a month come Thursday since he's been out of jail and he ain't made a pass at the road yet."

Luther Lee Tidwell says, "Most likely you're right. I figger that last eighteen months queered Hulett's brains just a mite more than they always was. Just yesterday I was driving my team up Valley Road and seen Hulett plowing that steep pasture lot of his. Yes sir, here in the dead of winter!"

"He maybe aims to plant turnips or buckwheat," says Alvin.

"Maybe so," says Luther Lee, "but he shore is going about it in a peculiar way. He ain't plowing *round* the hill but is running them furrows straight *up* and *down*."

Well, Alvin couldn't hardly believe it, so out he went to see for himself. He stood down there on the road and tilted his head back and looked up. There was Old Hulett plowing straight up and down till that hillside looked like a piece of pants-leg corduroy. So Alvin seen Luther Lee next day and said, "You shore was right. That old man is crazy as popcorn on a hot stove lid!"

"Crazy to the ground!" says Luther Lee. "But, anyhow, he's

leaving the road alone. That's one advantage he has for us now."

Well, it just did seem like nobody ever *could* be right when it came to Hulett Crossway. But nobody suspicioned that till one day the spring rains set in like the lining had been ripped out of heaven. At first it was just a cloudburst and then it was like the whole of the county was under a monster big waterfall and by night it was raining *so* hard that the ducks and geese commenced drownning. It didn't let up a drop till near morning and then the sun came out fine and bright and hot.

By the middle of day the star route mailman decided the roads was dry enough to try if he put his tire chains on. He came a-sludging and a-slewing down Valley Road without no trouble to speak of till he hit the stretch near Springhead. And then that poor man was outright stumped at the stand-in.

Because, the truth is, there just *wasn't* no stretch of road near Springhead alongside of Old Hulett Crossway's holdings! No, that rain had washed a good mile of it away absolute. Washed it into Painter Creek and by this time it was muddying up the Tennessee River halfway to Chattanooga. Never *had* been such a washout anywhere in the county. And next day folks came from miles around to look at it.

During the morning the County Superintendent of Roads and the whole County Court of Esquires came out to look at the damage. Old Hulett Crossway and his wife, his boys and boys-in-laws and all their children and wives and dogs was lined up inside the Crossway fence just a-laughing and a-carrying on.

Esquire Settle says, "That there is somehow Old Hulett's work I'm willing to bet my watch. And I'll shore handle him good for it *this* time. I'll give him the lawful limit. I dods, I'll *double* the lawful limit—if we find he really done it!"

Luther Lee Tidwell says, "He done it, all right."

"How you figger it?" says the Esquires.

"Why," says Luther Lee, "he didn't do a blessed thing but ditch that hillside pasture of his so's the first big rain would gully it deep and spread them gullies down to the road and wash it out!"

And everybody was so speechless that they couldn't hardly say a thing, for it was true and all there *seen* it was true.

Right then and there the Esquires held a meeting to decide what to do about Hulett Crossway for good and all. They argued for more than an hour and done a heap of figgering. So finally they came to a decision and passed a new ruling and told the County Superintendent of Roads.

Esquire Settle it was who told him. "Git yore men busy tomorrow," he says, "and run us a new county road around by way of Claybank."

"What about fixing this one?" he says.

"Well," says Esquire Settle, "we figger to leave it just like it is now. Forgit this stretch, that's all."

"How *come*, Esquire?" says the Superintendent.

"Well," says Esquire Settle, "the County Court looks at it this way. It's already costed the county near a thousand dollars to keep Hulett in jail them three times. He won't work to pay for his staying, so he's just an expense to the county.

"That ain't all," says Esquire Settle. "It's costed the County over two hundred dollars to patch up the road them two first times Hulett tore it up. It'd cost at least three thousand more to build this washed-out stretch back to where it was. It'd cost another thousand to put Hulett in jail again. And when he got out he'd figger up some new way to rip up the road and that would cost the Lord knows how much and then we'd have to

jail Hulett some more and pay his board and then he'd git out and tear up the road and it would cost still more to repair it and then—"

The Esquire looked right dizzy and had to stop a minute.

"To make a long song short," he says, "here's the pleasure of the County Court. Hulett's old but well-saved. He'll likely live to be a hundred. By that time the county will be bankrupt just supporting Hulett in jail and repairing this stretch of road when he tears it up. Us Esquires is practical men. We know when we're licked. So run the road round by way of Claybank and forgit this part here."

And if that ain't the very thing they done, may God bless the Devil!

So next morning Old Hulett and his boys and boys-in-laws was all out bright and early on what little was left of the road at each end of the washout. They plowed it up. Then they planted thistles.

*E. E. Miller*

*James R. Aswell*





*Comb Him  
Wet or Dry*

EPHRAM GILKY SURE WAS A CARD. HE'D DONE more funny things than most anybody that ever lived in the Valley, I reckon. A practical joker some called him, and he was that for a fact. He got more fun out of it than most anybody ever gits out of anything.

He could ape the preacher that came over to preach from further over in the Valley once a month. So ever once in occasion he would git up on a nail keg at the store, when a big bunch of loafers was setting around, and preach one of the gol-durndest sermons a body ever heard. Ephram wasn't none religious his self but a body that didn't know him and heard him quoting the Word from the Book would just naturally think he was one of the most convertedest saints.

Sometimes he would even call on some make-like deacon in

the Amen corner of the store to pass the hat around for collection to "take care of the pore preacher's family that was *de-pendent* on the mercy of the people." Course, all that was ever put in it was a staple-nail or a buckeye ball, most likely.

But one time when one of them store drummers that come around about twice a year was in the store, Ephram started in on the Holy Ghost and all the trimmings about it. Well, that drummer clean forgot what he was supposed to be doing and just listened in on the make-like sermon that he thought was real. Well, sir, when somebody passed the hat as usual, they passed it to the drummer feller first, and what do you reckon he done? Well, he flipped in a half a dollar.

Now, that hacked Ephram for the first time anybody around ever knowed of him being hacked. Some of the dyed-in-the-wool church-goers thought it would sure cure him of blaspheming, which was what they thought he done when he aped the preacher like that. But it wasn't long till he was at it again. Ephram never meant no harm, noways. They wasn't a better soul in the Valley when it come to helping out with the Valley things like log-rolling or house-raising than Ephram.

He sent off once and got some reading about how to throw his voice. Unbeknowing to everybody, he done that. And then things livened up considerable. He even made his old lady think one time that their house was hanted. He got to moaning and groaning around and made like all them rackets was coming from in under the bed. He done it in special after she got in the bed at night. Well, that pore woman got so nervous she wouldn't let Ephram leave the house of a night, and he did like to hang around here and yon, so he had to confess up to her about the voice-throwing. Course, she flew mad about it and told folks what he was doing and that's how it got out.

But the day they had the auction of a estate over at the county seat was about the beatenest thing a body ever saw. Some old folks had died and the heirs that lived clean over in another county wanted the property liquidified. So they was having a auction, and everbody went over—that is nearly everbody. Anyways, Ephram was there.

Well, the auctioneer got up there and started selling things off. A cook stove, a wash pot, and a heap of things. Then he come to the antiquish things. Them old things, heir-looms, some folks call them.

Then the fun started. A pretty nice looking old woman started bidding on a set of dog-irons. Well this old woman had been bidding on most everthing there and just run the bids up high, but always let the other feller tote off the goods. Ephram figgered she didn't have no cash and was just a put-on. At least that's what he said later on that he figgered.

Now there was one thing about him. Ephram didn't like no putting-on people. "Be what you are whether it's nigger or dog," was what he said. He was just as plain as an old shoe.

So outside of having some fun, he wanted to set her down a peg or two. So when they started bidding on them dog-irons, he knowed people would more than likely bid a right smart on them, on account of them being in the heir-loom class. The auction man said they was heir-looms.

Well, Ephram he waited until this here smart-alec woman started bidding. He waited until the price got up to nine dollars. Then he struck. "Nine-fifty," he said in a real society-like voice, just like that priss-ike woman done. Then he looked right at her. Naturally some folks that seen him looking at her looked that way, too, and everybody else thought she'd bid, which was natural on account of her already bidding on so

many things up to a certain point. Well, nobody said nothing for a minute, and that woman got flusterated.

"Who will bid more on these gen-u-ine brass andirons?" the auctioneering man said. "It's a pity to let them go for a third of what they're worth. How much am I bid?"

Then somebody bid way over in the far side of the crowd. "Ten dollars," they said, whoever it was.

"Ten-fifty," that priss-ike voice said again. Course Ephram looked at that old hen again, a-drawing attention to her some more. Well, she twisted around and fluttered about right much and looked at everbody around her like she was sort of stumped. But didn't nobody pay her no mind. Somebody else just went on and bid higher.

That kept up until them dog-irons was "sold to the woman with the plumes on her hat for fifteen dollars," and she looked like she was pretty mortified about it.

"I didn't bid on those andirons!" the woman said. "I didn't bid on those andirons after it got to nine dollars."

That auctioneering man looked right stern at her. "You mighty well did, mam, I heard you," he said. "But, *of course*, if you don't want them, I can auction them over again later."

Which he did.

Well, same thing happened again on a old dresser. Only the auctioneer man called it a high-boy and he said, "Gone to the lady with the plumes on her hat." She looked a little bit flusterated again.

"I guess you didn't bid again did you, mam?" was what the auctioneer man said to her.

"I did, but not last!" she sort of snapped back at him and the crowd sniggered and tittered and nudged each other around.





"Well, I didn't bid last," she said, "and I think something funny is going on around here, too," and she looked right smack at Ephram. Everybody else did, too.

"This man here is an imposter!" That's just what the lady called Ephram. An imposter. And when the auction man wanted to know on what ground she accused Ephram, she upped and said, just as uppity as an old dame can, that he was a ventriloquist. That meant he could throw his voice and make it sound like she was talking when she hadn't said a word.

Well, Ephram seen he was getting hemmed in and he started to sneak off, but a Law grabbed him.

Now, Ephram hadn't never been bothered by no Law before and he looked plenty scared. But he decided to confess up. So he told the Law what he meant to do. Just hack her on account of him thinking she was just running up them bids and didn't have no money.

That Law looked plenty hard at Ephram, "Just a little practical joker, eh?" says he. "Well, we don't take no fancy to your kind! I aim to take you up for a public nuisance."

And he did. He locked Ephram up in the county seat jail. Now that hurt Ephram's pride. He hadn't never been put in no jail before, and he didn't know how he could get out because he didn't have no money, nor did his friends.

It wasn't out of the common for them to have people to get arrested over at the county seat. That's why that Law was so quick to lock up Ephram. Everbody got a little fee for everything they done so they liked to get people in for the least puny thing. Well, Ephram knowed that and he knowed the money was all they wanted.

Well, everbody was strolling in and out the jail to see the man what got picked up. They walked past Ephram's cell and looked him over like he was a animal in a cage, and Ephram got an idea.

He begin to preach.

"Judge not that ye be not judged" was his text he took. And the folks begin to listen to him. He made them all think he was a preacher. He said verses just word for word like in the Bible itself.

Well, somebody from over in the Valley that knowed Ephram got what Ephram was driving at. So they passed a hat and the dimes and things begin to chink into it. Them people was worked up over what Ephram had done preached about. Well, Ephram preached a while longer and the hat was passed again on account of some more people had come in from the outside. And they got more money. Must have been ten dollars in all.

About that time the jailer came in. He seen all of that crowd.



"Clean out of here, all of you!" He pulled out a gun and said right loud and scared-like, "Ain't nobody going to lynch this man!" Well, the folks just hee-hawed at that!

"Lynch him! We aim to turn him loose!" somebody said and everbody laughed loud at that. That jailer looked scared.

"Not out of my jail, you ain't!" says he. "This man aims to pay me five dollars' fine first."

Well, Ephram begin to count out five dollars, all in chicken feed change. That jailer looked clean swept up and scattered. He knowed Ephram never had that money when he locked him up. But he turned the key and let Ephram out. Still and all, Ephram wasn't through putting on that show. He never did do nothing halfway. So soon as he got out he started all over again.

"Thanks for the use of your jail to preach in," was what Ephram said.

Well, that jailer's lower jaw dropped about a foot and his mouth was a-gaping open like a cave.

So Ephram threwed his voice right over into that jailer and said, "You're mighty well welcome, and I appreciate this fee a heap," and everybody hee-hawed some more. Well, that jailer got so blasted mad he was ready to spit fire, and he did nearly when Ephram said something else.

"Come on over, folks," says he, "to the saloon. All drinks is on me. We still got five dollars."

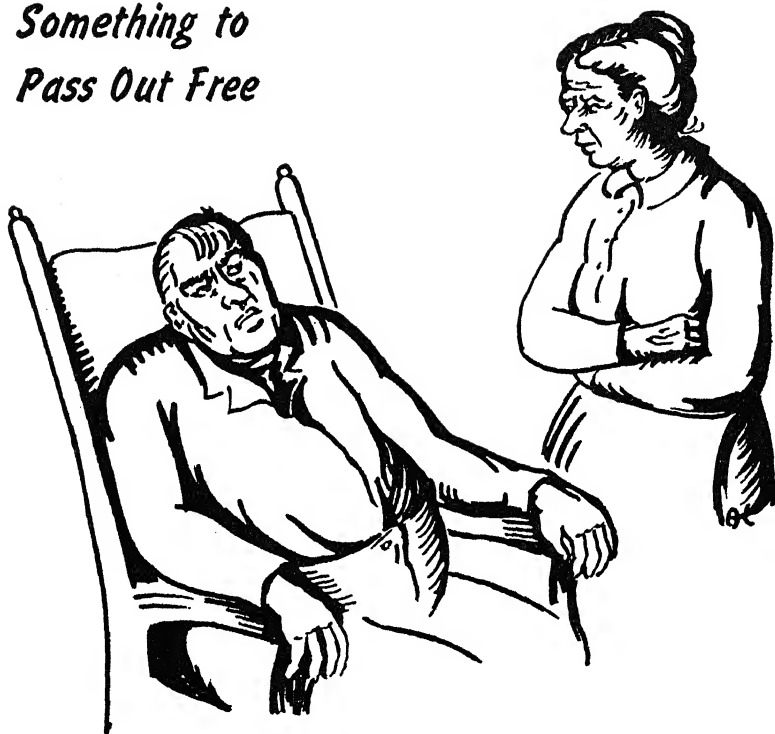
Somebody allowed it was sort of a church collection and couldn't be used in no saloon to get drinks.

"Well," says Ephram, "we had our preaching so now we aim to have the sacrament."

That Ephram Gilky was sure a card—comb him wet or dry.

*Julia Willhoit*

## *Something to Pass Out Free*



COME WHAT MIGHT, ONE MAN THAT NEVER missed a race out at old Walnut Track was Old Lacey Bridges. And I doubt if ever he put out a dime to get on the grounds—not counting the time I'm talking about when he was working out there for himself. Yes, Old Lacey had a sight of friends, they knowed he's a fool about horses, and one way or another they'd slide him by the gatekeeper every year. He never did have no money to pay himself in, seemed like he just wasn't cut out to make money. And that was the main sore spot with his wife, him not ever making a living for the two of them. They didn't have no kids, just themselves to keep up, but still not a

year come around that *his* folks or *hers*, or maybe friends didn't have to see them through it.

This time I'm trying to get down to, she said, "I just don't see how we're going to make it this winter. Summer's hard enough without money, but there's some things a body can't live without in winter."

Old Lacey didn't say a word. He knew when he saw her come charging down through the front yard like a mad bull, toward where he was setting there resting under the maple tree—he knowed he's in for some deviling. He just rocked back and forth in the old wicker rocker, taking his time, while his little nigger Timon didn't miss a swish with that turkey-tail fan.

"Every year it's the same," his wife went on. "Beg and borrow, beg and borrow, piling up a load of debts we'll never get paid. I'm near about shamed to face folks even in the Lord's house, and there's precious few places I go besides church."

Then Old Lacey looked his nagging wife in the eye and says, "You're going to get through this winter. And it ain't going to be on borrowed money, neither."

He wouldn't say another word, for all her hour's questioning.

And Old Lacey got right up out of that rocking chair and him and Timon hitched up his horse and buggy and was off to town. Old Lacey was a good talker and he had a sight of friends. In no time he'd talked somebody into lending him money for laying in a pretty fair stock of whiskey and wine. And in less than thirty minutes after he'd contracted for it, him and Timon was heading down the big road home.

"What you gwine do wid em spirits, Mister Lacey?" Timon asked.

Old Lacey said, "Sell em at the race track, of course. And we got to have something to pass out free, son. It's the fellow

with something free that gets trade around a race track or anywhere else folks gather for fun. But I know one thing. I just don't aim to give away whiskey and wine what's cost me money."

Timon said, "Ol Miss she got some blackberry wine down in de cellar. Six or seven gallon of hit."

So Old Lacey he just winked. Said he, "No use to ask her for it, Timon. Me and you'll sort of slip it out on the side."

"She aim to give it to de new parson for de church drinks," Timon says.

Old Lacey laughed aloud. "Then," says he, "if that new parson wants a taste of that blackberry wine, he'd better be getting himself a pass to the races."

Old Lacey and that little nigger Timon must have made fifty trips back and forth out to Walnut Track getting the bar set up at the proper spot beside the fence rail. And when they got it fixed up to suit Old Lacey, they carted the drinks out there and carried the last gallon of Old Mrs. Bridges' blackberry wine right along with the whiskey and the store-bought wine.

Folks came from miles around on horseback, in wagons, and on foot. Country folks were on hand by sun-up with their basket lunches, babies, dogs, and all. An hour or two ahead of time, city folks began to show up in their fine carriages. They switched off down to the stables to look the horses over, then went and put up a bet on their choice, and ended up back where everybody could see them strut in their fine clothes.

When time came to open up, Old Lacey poured the blackberry wine in a nice clean lardstand, put a water dipper in it, and about a dozen tin cups around so folks would feel free to help themselves. Right close by there was the whiskey barrel with a fancy little brass spigot to it.

The minute he turned his back, he heard Timon giggling and he turned around and said, "The Devil and Tom Walker, Timon! Stop fingering that turner!" He saw Timon was fooling with the whiskey barrel. "God Almighty! I ain't going to have all that good liquor wetting up the ground!"

And Timon took his hands off it for the time being, but not for long. He couldn't keep his fingers off it to save his soul. But he didn't let any more of the liquor drip to the ground after Old Lacey had cussed him out. He'd just watch for his chance when Old Lacey was busy talking, then he'd reach and take the dipper from the wine bucket to catch what came out the whiskey barrel when he gave the brass trick a good turn. Then when he saw Old Lacey looking his way, he'd just ease the dipper—half the time it was plumb full of whiskey—into the wine bucket. He'd pretend he was getting ready to pass out a free drink. There's just no telling how much of that good whiskey Timon dumped into that blackberry wine.

"Take two cups of it if it suits your taste!" Old Lacey said when the crowd started gathering. "Won't cost you a penny to drink that good wine!"

More than one took two cups and more. One of the jockeys kept going away and then coming back for another. First thing you know, this jockey up and started to taking off his clothes. Well, somebody dragged him off before any of the ladies fainted.

Now, Old Lacey had been dipping himself up one of those free cups every time he passed one out. He was about to the point where he didn't know whether he was Lacey Bridges or the jockey folks was mirating over for not having on any clothes. So he just shed off his white apron and put on the rider's coat like he knew what he was doing and kept right on





drinking the wine with the next fellow that came up for a free drink. By the time the races started, he wasn't in any shape to see what was going on. The fact of the business was, he'd dropped off to sleep in that old wicker rocker he had back of the bar.

"De hosses is gitting ready, Mister Lacey," Timon said. He kept trying and trying to rouse him up. "Dey's nigh bout ready to git off."

But it didn't do any good to talk horses or anything else to Old Lacey. He kept right on sleeping like he was in his own front private yard.

There was a fine lot of race horses out to Walnut that day. One of them, though, wasn't in the same class with the rest—a filly that didn't have any business being in the crowd she was running with. They called her Lady Jane and she did have speed now and then, but was a sight short of brains to go with her good legs. Yes, she was just about the longest long shot in the bunch.

Well, it was in the first race Lady Jane was in that what I'm talking about took place. There she was away, *way* back at the hind end trailing, and most of the horses was getting ready to round the last lap before the home stretch.

Now, one jockey up there thought he saw a chance to get in the center of the track for the finish. He cut right sharp across in front of the bunch. And then the whole lot of them piled up in such a mess as nobody ever saw before. Half the horses to the front piled up right on top of the first two that went down. The whole thing took place right at the turn of the track where Old Lacey's bar was.

Well, instead of just clearing the pile and taking her time getting down the home-stretch while the rest of the horses

were mixed up, Lady Jane came running up there like she might be headed for first place. She gave a big jump and went clear over the fence rail. She threw the boy that was riding her and knocked Old Lacey's bar to splinters.

"Whoa, there, Lady Jane! Whoa!" that little nigger Timon bellowed loud enough to wake the dead. He made a pass and got her bridle when she went down.

Folks scattered every which way to keep from getting trampled on. The jockey went through the air, head over heels.

"Hold her, son, hold her!" Old Lacey yelled. He came up out of his rocker just in time to see the bar move away from him. "Hold onto her! We'll make it!" he says.

Seemed like Old Lacey'd been dreaming. Dreamed his nagging wife was after him and gaining. So before folks knew what was in his head, Old Lacey jumped right up in that saddle.

Lady Jane must have thought heaven and earth had set down on her back all of a sudden. Anyway, she leaped right back over the fence with Old Lacey astride.

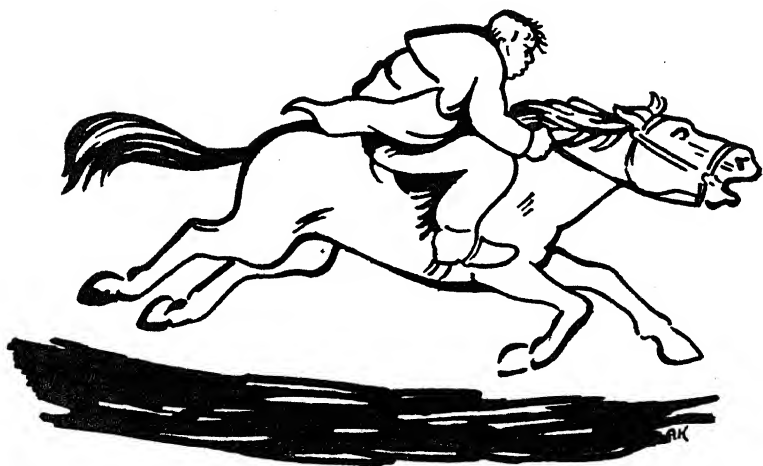
The two of them headed down the home stretch like Hell turned loose and the Devil chasing to catch up with it. And there wasn't a thing in the world wrong with the way Old Lacey was riding to keep the Devil or his wife or whatever it was after him from catching up, neither. He humped himself right over that filly's neck and headed her into first place. Lord Almighty, how those few folks who had picked Lady Jane and put her across the board on a long shot carried on.

And Old Lacey stayed right there in the saddle and stacked up them next two heats just like he did the first one—him and Lady Jane right in front place. When he came off the track at the end of the race, there wasn't a thing for him to do but name his price for riding and he did it. It was sort of irregular

but everybody liked Old Lacey, so they let it pass and declared him the winner.

I don't know to a dime what the owner of Lady Jane gave him, but in those days a hundred dollars went about twice as far as a thousand does this day and time. Anyhow, what he had was more than enough to see him and his wife and Timon through the winter. He didn't have to borrow a red cent from anybody till the winter after that.

*Jennette Edwards*





### *Ishen Golightly's Heavy Debt*

UNCLE ISHEN GOLIGHTLY NEVER WENT LIGHT on nothing in his whole life. Just as sure as he started to do a thing he went the whole hog or none, and when he got a notion in his head the Devil and Tom Walker couldn't git it out.

There's that idea of his about eating. He claimed he wasn't going to die in debt to his stummick for the good Lord says, "Eat, and be merry, for tomorrow you might die," and when the Lord tells a man to eat, he don't mean no finicky appetite. Well, Aunt Becky, his wife, says she knowed she fed him a plenty and *too* much for a little man like Uncle Ishen. She got exasperated with him and says it shore takes a Christian woman to live with a man like Uncle Ishen.

Looked like Uncle Ishen just couldn't never be satisfied with

nothing in moderation. Just look at them quare shoes he wore. Bless your sweet life he wouldn't wear boots like nobody else, not him! When he got a new pair, if they was give to him or if he bought them, it was all the same to Uncle Ishen. He just took them spanking new boots and cut off the tops and cut them into strings. He slashed the bottoms and through them openings he run the leather strings and tied them into knots, and knots, *and* knots till he had the most outlandish whanged mess you ever seen.

Once he went to the tanyard and got a whole passel of leather strings. He worked for days and days and when he got through you ain't never seen such a mess. Each shoe must have weighed at least ten pounds. He was happy as a pig in a sallet-bed and he says to Aunt Becky, "Now I'm fixed for awhile. No danger of flying yet. I'm weighted down good now."

So when Uncle Ishen went lumbering down the road with them shoes on, women would drop their cooking, dishwashing, or whatever they was doing, and run to the door to see him. Little boys and big ones would run after him and the men setting on the store porch would call out, "You sure ain't going to fly today, Uncle Ishen. You must still owe that debt."

Then Uncle Ishen would always say, "That is sure the truth. It ain't paid yet." Then and there he'd make up his mind which one of them fellers was going to have company the next day, and the next morning the feller who called to him would be certain to have Uncle Ishen come to his house for breakfast.

Now the menfolks didn't mind so much for they thought it a joke to send Uncle Ishen away just stuffed like a turkey fowl on a Christmas day, but the womenfolks had the cooking to do and they just naturally tore at the bit when they seen him coming. One of the children would come running into the house

yelling, "Mammy, yonder comes Uncle Ishen! Better git the fire a-going and the pot a-biling!"

And the Mizzis would say, "Yes, bring in the smokehouse, for your pap will just see how much he can stuff into that old man's gullet. Never seen such a glutton in all my life. Some of these days he's just going to do his self a mischief just from eating too much."

Well, Uncle Ishen didn't never need no urging. Of course he'd always *pretend* he was just sort of passing by and dropped in to pass the time of day.

So the man of the house would say polite-like, "Uncle Ishen, draw your cheer up and eat a bite."

Sometimes the wife would try to head him off by saying, "Guess Uncle Ishen's et, for he's one of these early birds that gits up and goes about his business."

But it wouldn't stave off Uncle Ishen. Not a bit of it! No, he'd just grin-like and say, "I declare Becky gits stingier and stingier all the time. She didn't give me but two rashers of ham and four eggs this morning. She lowed that was enough for any man and when I asked for the fourth cup of coffee she fairly blowed up. I told her it were a disgrace when a man couldn't git enough to eat at his own house. So guess I can hold a little mite more just to be friendly-like."

Then he'd pull up that chair to the table and unloosen his belt, and to see him eat you'd thought he'd never had a bite for days.

All the children would gather around and agg the old man on. Rasher and rasher of side meat, biscuits by the dozen, and no less than ten eggs and six cups of coffee would Uncle Ishen eat for one breakfast.

Then he'd start for home, but if he passed another neighbor's

house who was having a later breakfast he'd just have to drop in and pass the time of day with them, and so he'd go until some days he'd eat as many as four breakfasts.

People kept telling Uncle Ishen he was going to eat one meal too many. Because no natural stummick could stand the way he treated his. But he would always say, "Can't be hoped. God give a man a longing to eat. I ain't going to die in debt to my stummick. Seems to me it's a kind of a godly duty to try and pay that heavy debt."

Now, there was a big picnic and barbecue when Sam Tippetoe was elected representative from the county. Every wag in the county came, so some of the boys made it up to see just how much old Uncle Ishen could eat. Now these young rascals meant no harm. They just wanted to have some fun.

Well, Uncle Ishen he was on the ground early, and spent the whole morning near the barbecue pit. Long about twelve o'clock when all the speaking was over, two of the Borden boys come up and took Uncle Ishen by the arm and led him to the speakers' platform and set him down.

Ned Borden, as mischievous a sprig as ever drewed a breath, he says, "Now, Uncle Ishen, we aim to see that you pay off that debt to your stummick today. You just set right here and we'll bring you all you can eat."

That little dried-up old man rubbed his belly and grinned. "It'll take a lot, boys!" he says. "I didn't git but only one breakfast this morning. So bring on the rations and be sure you don't skimp the barbecue."

Several other boys joined the Borden boys when they found out what was going on. They lined up with such a load of victuals as you never seen. One of them toted a heaped-up dish of barbecue, another one a pile of fried chicken, and another





ie a platter of boiled country ham. Then come others with potato salad, a whole pan of thick soggy sodie biscuits, and corn-lightbread. One little fellow brought a quart jar of each pickle, and another hardly large enough to carry the pan, come along with a pan filled with good old chicken and dumplings.

Uncle Ishen he looked around at the crowd. Then he looked down at the food placed all around him. He smacked his lips

and lit in. First he snatched up a big hunk of barbecue and put it between two slices of corn-lightbread, then he yanked a big chicken drumstick with the other hand. There he set eating a bite first from one hand and then from the other.

He'd just about et half of that food, when he seemed to miss something. He turned to one of the boys and says, "Where's them deviled eggs? I ain't never heard of a barbecue without deviled eggs."

Joe Borden yelled, "All right, Uncle Ishen. I'll git you some," and off he started, but he didn't go far until Uncle Ishen's preacher brother Peter stopped him.

"Now look here, Joe," says the preacher, "you know what an old fool Ishen is. Why, he'll set there eating as long as you bring it to him. If you keep on you'll kill the old fool. Now just you boys stop!"

But Joe he says, "Now, Brother Peter, you know we ain't a-going to hurt Uncle Ishen. He can't eat no more than he can, so let the old man have all he wants."

So then the womenfolks gathered round and tried to git the boys to stop. "Sure as you are living," they says, "you boys is a-going to kill that old man. He'll not live till tomorrow if you don't stop."

But nothing could stop the boys. After Uncle Ishen had et all that meat and stuff, they piled him full of cake and pie. You just couldn't see where such a little man could put so much. He was that full he could hardly git off the platform. Brother Peter kept asking him how'd he feel.

Uncle Ishen says, "Fine! Ain't never had such a good time!"

Then a little tyke who had been watching the fun come up to him and said, "Uncle Ishen, here's a poke of candy. Bet you can't eat it."

The crowd was in a maze when Uncle Ishen took the poke of candy and set down under a tree and et every last piece of it. Such a commotion went on among the women.

"It's a shame!" they says.

"It's murder! For that man will sure be bound to die from eating so much."

Everybody was talking and predicting that he'd be sick unto death, but Uncle Ishen paid no mind to any of them. He just set under a tree and went sound asleep.

Long middle of the evening, a cloud come up and looked mighty threatening. Everybody begun to get ready to go home. The wind rose, and the clouds hung low. Brother Peter went to wake up Uncle Ishen. First thing Brother Peter thought when he seen him lying there was that he was dead but when he shook him and got him half awake, Uncle Ishen says, "Bring it on, boys. My stummick ain't paid yet."

Brother Peter shook him good. "You fool," he says, "come on home. A storm's a-coming up and you need to git home where Becky can look after you. You're going to be sicker than a dog."

So Uncle Ishen stumbled to his feet and looked round at the crowd and said, "Well, folks, my stummick ain't paid yet. That was just an installment that was past due. I'll pay the next one at the next gathering."

About that time Joe Borden come running up with a whole ham and a loaf of bread. "No need to wait, Uncle Ishen," says he. "Just take you this and pay it off now."

Says Uncle Ishen, "Why thankee, Joe. I'll do that very thing."

So he took the ham and shoved the butt end under his chin and held the shank end with his left hand like a fiddler holds a

fiddle. He stuck the loaf of bread in his shirt. Then he cut off a hunk of ham with his pocketknife and pulled off a chunk of bread and stuffed his mouth with them. The crowd stood and watched him as he went down the road, and as far as they could see he was eating on the ham and bread.

Everybody started home, all talking about Uncle Ishen, and telling themselves that Uncle Ishen was sure to be a mighty sick man that night if he lived and many thought likely as not he wouldn't live.

Well, that storm growed worse and the wind most blew a hurricane. Uncle Ishen dragged his self along. With them whanged shoes weighing ten pounds apiece and all that food he'd guzzled, it was just about all he could do to climb that little hill up to his house. He got to the gate and just couldn't go no further. So he leaned against that big old oak tree to rest a spell. Finally he dragged his self into the house. Aunt Becky was waiting for him and when she seen him come in with that ham bone she squealed, "What in tarnation you doing with a old ham bone?"

Uncle Ishen looked at the bone and says, "I'll be juggers if I ain't et the whole darn thing. Them Borden boys give me the ham as I was leaving the barbecue and I just minced like on it as I come home. Didn't know I'd et it all."

Then he set and stared and finally says, "Doggone if I ain't gitting sort of sharp-set again, Becky. Why'd you have to bring up eating like that?"

"Think I'd like to have some of that good old kraut of your making. How about it, old woman?"

He got up and started to the door and Aunt Becky was mad as a hornet by this time, so she pushed him out and slammed the door.

"Now," says she, "you can just stay in the smokehouse all night, and if you git sick, just eat some more kraut."

So the next morning Aunt Becky saw that Uncle Ishen didn't come in and Aunt Becky felt sorry she'd been so hard on him. So she went out to see about him. And she found him lying near the kraut barrel with his head up against it and his eyes staring. She didn't have to look but once to know Uncle Ishen was dead. She was mighty tore up about it and blamed herself.

Poor old Uncle Ishen! That streak of lightning had hit him just as he was a-fixing to dip the big wooden fork down into the kraut barrel.

Most folks says the good Lord just took him away before he killed his self trying to pay that debt to his stummick. He was struck dead before he could taste a bite.

*Lena E. Lipscomb*



## *He-Coon*



WHEN YOUNG DOC MYRICK GOT THROUGH with his schooling, he says, "I've got to start my practice somewhere but I declare I don't know where to do it. I don't want just measles and croup and bold hives and truck like that. I aim to be a real surgery and you don't get so many cases that call for cutting hereabouts."

Somebody asked him, "Reckon gunshot wounds and butcher-knife cuts would do you?"

"Oh sure. Anything like that," says Doc.

"Well, the place for you is the Nation. It's the roughest part of McNairy County. They have more knife brawls and shootings in a week down there than happens in a year around here.

The place was settled by old Fielding Hurst and his bush-whackers and it's been wild and woolly ever since. So if it's slashings and slug-holes you want to practice on, you sure ought to go to the Nation."

It sounded good to Doc Myrick and he got himself together and went to the Nation. He went back into the hills for miles to Muscadine Ridge and rented half of a hound-run cabin from some folks named Biles. He had his office and living quarters in that wing and the Biles lived in the other. He eat his meals with them and Mammy Biles done his housekeeping, such as it was.

Right in from the start Doc Myrick had his hands full. He'd come to the Nation for practice and he got it. He got every brawl case that could be brought to him in one piece and at times he downright had seamstress' cramp from stitching up wounds. Oftentimes a man would be too chewed up with buck-shot to be sewed and then Doc would have to sort of darn him.

"Hit air a real comfort to have a doc in here," the folks said.

One night after a hard day Doc was setting in the Biles's side of the cabin talking when somebody beat on the door.

Pap Biles went to the door and took the bar down and unhitched the chains and unlocked the big old padlock and opened up. "Who all?" he says. Then he turned white and crawfished backwards from the door.

"Why, come in, Cap," he says. "Have a cheer and take a seat, Cap."

So who come through that door but Cap Shankle himself, the he-coon of Muscadine Ridge and the hardest-favored, brawlingest, slayingest man in the whole Nation. Cap was a mean-un and he looked a mean-un. About five foot five, he was, weigh-

ing anyhow two hundred pounds. His face was all covered with brindled hair as stiff as a wire brush and he had hands the size of skillets. He was platt-eyed in his left eye and the other one squinted. There was two whetstoned butcher knives in his belt and a big old oily Colt's forty-five in a holster. Doc had heard plenty about Cap Shankle but hadn't never seen him before.

So Cap stood blinking in the lamplight while Pap and Mammy Biles gathered up the young'uns and scooted out the side door. He give Doc a hard scowl, let fly a slew of ambeer into Mammy's Biles' washtub, and says, "You the Doc?"

"I am that," says Doc Myrick.

Cap says, "Then come on. My old mammy's having the miseries and you're the man can ease her."

"All right," says Doc. "Wait till I get my bag."

"Git it in a rush," says Cap, "if you know what's good for you."

The Shankles lived across the ridge in Snuff Dip Holler about an hour's good walk from the Biles's cabin. Cap kicked the front door open and pushed Doc inside. There was a little old ratty-haired woman propping on her elbow in a big four-poster bed and she said, "This here young feller the doc? Why, Cap, he ain't even got no sideburn whiskers on him!"

Doc says, "I'll grow them later, ma'am. People would feel it was put-on if I growed them yet."

The old lady pointed her finger at Doc and says, "Air you up on all kind of miseries, young feller?"

Doc says he was.

"Well," says she, "these here of mine ain't no little piddling common-run miseries. Everything ever I done I always done



better than anybody else. So when hit come to raising the miseries, I just naturally raised the biggest crop in the whole dad-burned Nation."

Then the old lady told him about her symptoms. And she had a plenty! She had symptoms of everything from tetter to the jaunders. So Doc figgered she didn't have nothing at all the matter with her but her age and imagination.

"Hit used to be," says she, "I could keep my miseries whittled down to where I could abide them. Used to be an old half-Chickasaw Injun womern around here would make me up a jug of yarb medicine every once in so often, good strong stuff that set you on fire and burnt out the humors in your blood. But that old womern up and died on me. I just ain't done no good since then, neither. Tried all sorts and kinds of medicine, but none of hit's got any power. So my miseries aches and aches."

"I think I know your trouble, Mrs. Shankle," Doc Myrick tells her, "and just the medicine for it. I'll fix you up a bottle of good strong stuff and send it over."

The old lady set up and says, "Cap, you go with the doc and git my bottle of remedy. And you hurry back, hear me, Cap!"

Well, the long and short of it was that Doc took a bottle of corn-likker and dumped a power of bitter stuff and green coloring into it—nothing to do no damage, of course, but it did make a red-hot taste. One swig would knock the top of your head off, pretty near.

He told Cap, "Your mammy can have as much of this as she wants."

Says Cap, "You're mightily dod-durn right, she can! Better

not no man say nowise else in *my* hearing!" Then he went on off without so much as a thank-you to young Doc Myrick.

Doc didn't think no more about it till the first of the month. Then he made out a bill for a dollar and sent it over to Snuff Dip Holler. He give it to Dewey Biles who was the Biles's big simple-wit teen-boy.

After supper that night Doc was setting at the table with the Biles, letting his meal settle down, when Dewey says, "I sure taken them duns around today, didn't I, Doc?"

"Yep," says Doc, "you did now, Dewey."

Dewey felt awful proud of himself, so he says, "Yes sir! I taken one to the Jurdans and one to the Garners and one to the Shankles—"

Pap Biles stopped him right there. "Oh, shet your fool mouth, Dewey. I swear! You know you never done no such of a thing as take a dun to Cap Shankle."

"Why I sure done it, too!" says Dewey. "Doc given me one to take to the Shankles and that's just what I done."

"Why you lying little half-hammered idiot!" says Pap. "Doc, what makes that boy tell such stretchers?"

Doc says, "The boy ain't lying, Pap. I sent a bill to Cap Shankle. Why not? He owes it."

Pap Biles almost fell out of his chair. He says, "Why, great man alive! Sending Cap Shankle a dun! Oh, my days and times. . . !"

Mammy Biles dropped a plate and broke it. Her face turned pale, then sickly yellow, and then white again.

Doc says, "You don't mean to tell me . . . ?"

"Yes I do!" groans Pap. "I'm telling you right, Doc, if you aim to see tomorrow's morning, you just better git up and dust

for somewheres away far-off! Cap Shankle will bore you a new one just as sure as I'm setting on this cheer right now! My gub! Sending a dun to Cap Shankle! Aw!"

Doc felt kind of uneasy but he just laughed at the bug-eyed way the Biles carried on.

"Why, looky here, Doc," says Pap. "Once fifty year or so ago a man sued Cap Shankle's grandpap over a span of oxen. The man's name was Delmus Parkins and he had to leave McNairy County to keep the Shankles from nailing his hide to a tree. Well, not ten years back a man moved into the Nation here from Alabama and started him a little sawmill. His name was Mister Yates Perkins. Somebody tells Cap about it, and you know what? Cap he didn't do a form thing but grab up his Colt's forty-five and go down and plug Mister Yates Perkins toreckly through the heart.

"Well, Mister Perkins' relations down across the Alabama line come up to Selmer and told the Shurff they didn't think it was right. And so the Shurff he come up to Snuff Dip and says, 'I believe you had ought to tell me why you shot Mister Yates Perkins, Cap.'

"Cap says, 'You know well's I do, Shurff, about that old he-nobody Delmus Parkins suing Grandpap Shankle.'

"Shurff says, 'But, Cap, this here man you shot was a *Perkins*. That man back yonder was a *Parkins*. They wasn't a drop of kin.'

"'Don't you reckon I know that?' says Cap.

"'Why then, Cap,' says the Shurff, 'wonder if you'd mind telling me why you shot him?'

"Says Cap, 'Damn hit, Shurff, ain't no man going to come in here with a name *that* like the man who sued my grandpap and git away with hit!'"



Doc just set there listening to Pap Biles and not much knowing what to think.

"That ain't the half, no not even the hundredth of the way Cap Shankle does," Pap says. "You take about a year back. Cap was setting on a rock down by the Selmer Road with a bunch of other men watching a hoss-shoe pitching when along come a stranger.

"The stranger was whistling 'Hot Pot Susy' and enjoying himself. He come breasting of the rock where Cap was setting and Cap yanked out his Colt's forty-five and shot the stranger through the head.

"Preacher Ivory was there and he says, 'Cap, howcome you killed this stranger?'

" 'Why hell, Preacher!' says Cap. 'You know well as I do that he wasn't whistling that tune right!' "

That's the way Pap Biles went on for an hour's time. Finally

Doc Myrick couldn't stand no more, so he went over on his side of the hound-run and fooled around awhile. But he got to worrying and fretting to where he felt he had to have company, even if it was only the Biles.

He went back across the hound-run, but there wasn't a Biles nowhere. They'd teetotally left and vanished. Hadn't taken a thing with them. No sir Bob, they'd skun out, leaving the doors wide open to the night.

Doc felt nervouser then than ever. Figgered he'd better bar and chain and lock the doors. He went over to his wing of the cabin and started for the door.

But Doc stopped right where he was and commenced a hard teeth-rattling sweat. For who did step through the door but Cap Shankle.

"I want to see you," says Cap.

Well, Doc near done a bean. But he had presence of mind. He says, "Ain't your bootlace undid, Cap?"

So Cap looked down and Doc breezed out the other door. His feet hit the ground about every three yards and he tore up the ridge through the hazelnut bushes like a rabbit goes through grass. He could hear Cap coming behind him, yelling, "Stop off, there, Doc! Stop, I tell you!"

Then Cap started shooting. Every time that Colt's forty-five went off, it sounded like a cannon to Doc. Every time one of them big slugs went *WHEeeeng* over Doc's head, he went a little faster. He couldn't see a thing in the pitch-black night, but he made pretty good time for a young man that's beginning to fatten.

Cap kept shooting and yelling and Doc kept tearing through the hazelnut bushes till pretty soon the moon rose. And it didn't rise none too soon.



Doc pulled up so sudden he could smell the shoe leather burning. Yes, he pulled up right stump on the edge of Tick Bush Drop. Another step and he'd gone flying out into nothing and then dropped four hundred feet on more sharp rocks in one place than was anywhere else in the Nation.

And behind him come Cap Shankle, cussing and yelling something terrible. So Doc just give down in the knees and says to himself, "This is the end of my time for sure."

Cap grabbed him by the shirt and jerked him to his feet and glared at him. Doc's kneebones sounded like a couple of dice. He wanted to yell and he couldn't even whisper. His tongue had swole up and choked him. He couldn't lift an arm, he couldn't make a move. There he stood like an upended chunk of wood waiting to be split by the ax.

"Dod-durn you!" Cap bellers, giving him a hard shake. "When the he-coon tells a man to stop, he ought to stop!"

"I—I swear I d-didn't hear you," says Doc.

Cap says, "I shot at you, didn't I? Can't you take a hint?"

Doc seen Cap's other hand move like a snake's tongue and he thinks, "He's going at his Colt's forty-five. My sweet mother in Glory, I'll be with you soon!"

But Cap just jammed something in Doc's hand and says, "Hit were prime miseries medicine, Doc. My mammy says thank you and much oblige."

Doc just had time to see Cap trotting up the ridge before he fainted away.

When he come to his senses it was high morning and him laying in the sun on the edge of Tick Bush Drop all soaked in dew. He couldn't rightly figger howcome till he opened his hand and seen the silver dollar Cap Shankle had put there.

*James R. Aswell*



### *Even Stephen*

THAT ERLEEN GOWEN WAS A PRETTY LITTLE trick. Hair all yellow and eyes of blue, and the winningest ways in the valley. She hadn't no more than outgrewed pigtails and put rats in her hair when young Woody Upchurch set his claiming eye on her and let the other young bucks know he was serious.

Woody seen Erleen home from all the get-ups and he set in the parlor with her ever Sunday after dinner. Didn't keep company with nobody else. She didn't neither, because if any young buck spoke her name around Woody, he blowed on his knuckles and cut a mean eye.

Soon as he could with decency, Woody says, "Sugar pie, I need a dough roller."

"Honey bubbles," says Erleen, "I need a wood chopper."

So Woody give her old man a gallon of good red whisky and said his piece. Before long the whole valley knowed he'd



spoke for Erleen. He started clearing land and snaking logs for a nice sizable house. Erleen she begun quilting and tatting and getting advice from the old wed-wimmen.

Well, there was a lasses-stirring over at Fiery Gizzard and a play-party afterwards. It drawed people near and far. And that's how come Dain Palmore, that dog with the ladies, to be there in the first place. He got drawed in because he fiddled a fiddle better than anybody anyways close by. Nor that wasn't all. That man could just naturally take a body to realms above with them ballets and fritter-minded things he sung when he got to shoving hoss hairs crost the strings and patting his foot steady.

He loved all the girls, Dain Palmore did, but never got his self pinned down to no special one. He just played and sung for the whole passel to dance. But this night he changed complete. He just fell headlong, neck deep, and plumb absolute for Erleen. He looked direct at her while he sung "The Pretty Mohea," and any puddin-head would of knowed what he was about. Anybody could tell he was setting up to her. Woody knowed it too and his face looked like a thunder bonnet. So Dain he played and sung a piece about "Susie's Sunday Clothes." The last verse was what done the work.

*"They ain't no man a-living  
In the house or out of doors,  
'Cept me that's going to swing her  
All in her Sunday Clothes."*

Then he got up and danced a set with her.

"It's a shame, little girl," says he.

She curled her eyelashes at him and she says, "What's a shame?"

"That you're spoke for—and by a slow pokey chaw-bacon like Woody Upchurch, at that."

She did blush and drop her eyes. "Be keerful," she says. "Woody'd cut a rusty was he to hear you talk like that! And better not scrooge me so tight, neither."

"Little I keer," says he, "what Woody Upchurch does. I'd wade briars barefoot for the chance to dance a set with you. I'd take on the whole Upchurch tribe just to hold you tight."

Erleen giggled and didn't say nothing more.

Yep, that's what started it—the feud between Woody and Dain. Woody laid for him after the party and showed him the knuckles of his fist. "Watch yore step, Palmore!" he says.

So Dain just whipped out his big springknife and started feeling its edge. "Don't worry about *me*, Bud!" he says. "*I'll* get by!"

From then on the get-ups and play-parties was just like a three-ring circus. Anything was bound to happen and most generally did.

Woody went around looking square-jawed and when Erleen went to a possum stew with Dain Palmore one week night, folks said watch out! So Woody got full of popskull one night and went over and how he done it all by his self nobody knows. But he tore down the whole groundwork and first laying of logs to his right sizable house he had planned on. Yep, pulled ever last little stob and everthing and scattered it all.

Then he drunk another big dram and went and had a knock-down drag-out fight with Dain that set the community talking. Neither one beat because they was separated, but they was both as bloody as stuck pigs.

"Next time," Woody yells at him when they was pried apart, "I'll end yore pleasant life!"

"Haul in yore neck, Upchurch!" says Dain, "or I'll win you a pitchfork in the everlasting beyond!"

So they rived each other that way, with Dain running more and more ahead because of the way he used that sweet-jaw on Erleen.

But don't think Woody was laying around asleep! He done a right smart thing. He run for constable. Now, ever woman the whole stretch of anywhere just goes hog-wild and pigeon-crazy over a man that can hip a six shooter. Woody figgered on that.

But the day of the election a real serious thing happened. According to the judges of the election, it was a heap of mysterious markings on a heap of them ballots. A whole passel of them had to be burnt and that just defeated Woody.

"You'll notice," says Woody, "that Dain Palmore was one of the election judges. You'll notice he's the one found them funny markings."

And some folk said it did look right queer.

Anyhow, the night after it was over, Dain was made a deputy to the High-Sheriff. So Dain could carry a bigger gun with more fire for it and have a bigger badge than any shirttail constable could.

Well! That badge and big blue steel pistol turned the tide for good. Dain nosed Woody out plumb absolute. One night him and Erleen run off and got hitched.

It might near done for Woody. For a while there he wouldn't eat, just holed his self up and drunk whiskey, and cussed everybody out that tried to help him. Finally he come round some, but everybody could see it still hurt inside him.

Way Dain done didn't help none, neither. He studied to find ways to keep Woody hotted up about losing that pretty little



Erleen. He made it a point of a Sunday morning to take his seat on the Whittling Rocks by the church and start whittling and bragging about married life.

"You air sure taking on some good feed, ain't you, Dain, to be getting as hefty as you are?" somebody'd be shore to say to get him started.

"Shore thing! Erleen is the best little cook in this whole valley or anywheres around. And let me tell you, that girl is smart as all get-out! More than that, she can shore hold a dollar till the eagle squawks, too."

And he would squint out from under his eyebrows at Woody and Woody would squirm around and look miserable and get up and leave after awhile.

Then, out at all the get-ups Erleen she was so everlasting mushy with Dain that Woody just about quit coming to things. Looked like Erleen could of saved her loving for behind closed doors, but she didn't. Not her!

"Dainy, sweet, are you shore you chunked the fire in the hearth down enough?" she'd say, and that would just naturally make a body know what a cozy little place they'd left to come to the corn-shucking or whatever it was.

"Dainy, darling pie, you'll carry me to the surrey, won't you, pet?" she'd say. "It's rained and got the weeds all wet, sweet. Now don't hurt your back, darling," she'd say when he picked her up. Yep, it was Hubby-Dubby you'll do this and Sweetheart and Baby please do that till all the whole valley knowed what all Erleen called Dain.

The wimmenfolks said she should have waited till she got back home to play up to her man like that. But all the men said they'd give a pretty to be in Dain's shoes, or, more like it, to have their brogans where Dain's was of a night. "If she's that

full of honey out in front of folks," they said, "what all must she be full of in front of nobody but theirselves?"

Sometimes it got next to Woody so that he quit coming to church or the Whittling Rocks, either, and Woody was a man that just *loved* to whittle and talk. He'd just wander off in the woods and kick stumps. He'd go in his house and shut the doors and set in a corner cussing because he'd lost such a sweet loving little woman.

Woody and Dain wouldn't hardly speak. You'd think Dain would been glad to let dead dogs lie, now he had the girl. But he seemed to get sourer on Woody ever year that passed. Taunted him all the time, told tales and blackguarded on him to try and get him in trouble. About once a year they'd mix up in a fist fight and have to be separated.

Fact is, Dain begun acting so queer-like that folks said his conscience was aching him because of how he'd tricked Woody Upchurch out of his plighted girl. Dain taken to heavy drink and all sorts of wildness. He got bags under his eyes and deep lines in his face. He commenced taking outdacious chances in his deputy work—going after bad uns without no posse and harrying moonshiners way back in the ridges where nobody'd ever been sent by the High-Sheriff before. Didn't have to send Dain. He just went, with his blue steel pistol throwing the lead.

So finally he up and got his self shot by some moonshiners he tried to take in to the county seat by his self. They done him up so bad that he knowed his time had come.

Then Dain Palmore done something that taken the whole valley by storm. He sent Squire Lidford over to fetch Woody and Woody come.

"Woody, I'm a dying man," Dain says. "I think it's my bounden duty to look after Erleen and the kids even after the

Old Feller calls me in. I've thought and I've thought and I believe you're the man to carry on after I'm gone. You knowed Erleen before I did. She's yores by rights. I done you a foul trick when I taken her away from you. So here on my death-bed, I'm handing her back to you, Woody. Yes, I just boogered you out of her like I boogered you out of that election. So let's even Stephen, Woody. You take Erleen, Woody, and I'll die in peace."

Woody was so taken aback and all that he just broken down and cried and shaken Dain's hand and promised he'd do it. So Dain he turned his face to the wall and he died.

Now that was the beatinest thing ever happened in the Valley. Hadn't no man never asked another one to marry his widow and some said it was right niggerfied. But Woody went around as foolhappy as a young'un with a new play-pretty. At last he was bound to get his true love for sure. Erleen said it suited her all right.

There was them that said they wouldn't have no such second-hand goods, but Woody just went around with his head in the clouds and before Dain was good and cold he married up with Erleen and moved into Dain's house with her and Dain's set of young'uns.

Come the first Sunday after they was wed and Woody didn't come to the Whittling Rocks like always. All the regular whittlers was there laying for him.

"Woody must be stove up this morning or honeymooning one," somebody said. "Ain't never missed coming over to jaw on Sunday morning before."

"Yander he comes now," said old Scudder Box, "and he shore pears to be hell-bent on going somewheres."

There come Woody, with his head hung down, kicking at

the rocks in the road, slapping at the tree branches that touched him. He set down with no more than a howdy and started whittling like fury.

Now old Scudder Box was so old that he could get away with most any kind of pesterating. So he ups and says right mournful-like, not looking at no one a-tall, "Hit shore is a sad get-together without Dain being here, ain't it?"

Nobody said nothing. Most of the bunch was thinking the old cooter should ought to keep his trap shut seeing as Woody was setting in Dain's nest now.

"Seems like he ought to be here whittling or playing mumbledy-peg."

Still nobody said nothing.

But old Scudder was so cranksided he wasn't going to be shut up by nobody's silence, so he said, "It shore would be nice to see him a-coming down the path here this morning, now wouldn't it, Woody?"

"You're mighty gol-durn right!" says Woody. "I'd like to see that two-faced horn-tooting polecat walking down that path, myself!"

Woody pulled up his britches leg, "Looky here! See that big blue bruise? Erleen done it with a sallet pan she throwed at me."

Then he pulled up his sleeve and showed a cut four inches long. "Erleen hit me there with a butcher knife she flung."

And then he taken off his hat and kind of touched a lump as big as a goose egg. "Skillet," he said.

He says, "That confounded Dain never meant no amends when he called me to his deathbed. He didn't mean that even Stephen truck like it sounded. Why, he died hating me, and after one week with that Erleen I know why."



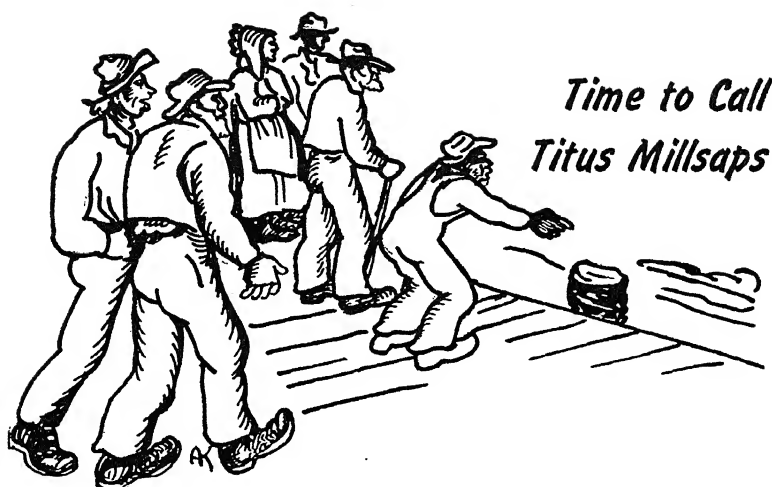
Woody taken off his hat, threw it on the ground, and jumped up and down on it. Bitter as oak-gall, he says, "If ever last lick that shrew-woman hit me ain't Dain Palmore reaching out of his grave and whacking me because I let him get her away from me, you just tell me what it is?"

So Woody started jumping on his hat again.

*Julia Willhoit*

*James R. Aswell*





TO LOOK AT HIM, YOU JUST NEVER WOULD have suspicioned that Titus Millsaps done that sort of thing.

Any warm day you could pass along Front Street and there he'd be tilted back in his chair in front of his livery stable across from the wharf, a little fat man of about five foot tall and his little fat legs so short that with him setting his feet couldn't touch the ground. He was bald and shiny and he had big blue pop eyes and brushy gray sideburn whiskers growing almost down to his chin—only he didn't have much chin to speak of. He always dressed sporty. You know, race-hoss sort of clothes, checked pants and coat and a big gold watch chain across his middle.

No, by his looks setting there talking to the loafers nobody would suspicioned Titus Millsaps was a man that dived for dead bodies in the river.

Day in and day out Titus set where he could watch the river with a noticing eye. It was his hobby and there's no telling why a man takes up a hobby. Maybe Titus felt the call like a preacher.

Anyhow, he'd been hunting for drowned people for years. He was known far and wide for it.

Let a man go down for the third time and everybody would say, "It's time to call Titus Millsaps."

Titus would come, hell for leather, driving his high-wheeled sulky with his little black bag by his side and his derby hat set square on his head. He'd pull up with his hoss raring in a cloud of dust. He'd throw out the hitching block, grab his bag, and jump out and start his fat little legs hustling down the river bank to where the crowd was standing around arguing about where the drowned party had gone down.

So the crowd would sort of draw back to let him through and he'd come hustling. Everybody knew better than say anything to him at first. He'd put his little black bag down and draw his self up as tall as he could. He'd stand there with his arms folded, chewing on his lip, with his big blue pop eyes looking up the river and down the river. He'd rub his bald shiny head and pull at his gray sideburn whiskers.

Then he'd turn kind of slow and say, "Where did he go down?" in his high thin wheezy way of talking. "How far out was he?" he'd say. "Was he a big one or a little one?"

Everybody'd start telling him all at once. They'd point every which way. Titus would stand there pulling at his sideburn whiskers and frowning and saying, "Well, it don't matter nohow. It ain't where the party went under that counts but where he's at now."

Most generally there'd be some old shantyboatman around in the crowd. Titus would spot him and hook his finger at him and the two of them would move off a ways from the crowd and talk low to each other for a while. Everybody knew better than to try to hear what they said. Titus was touchy. If you

fooled with him he'd blow up and have a fit. He'd fire back at you, "All right! You can call somebody else in!" When he said that, he was through and done. He'd go stomping away and nobody could beg enough to get him to come back.

So people didn't cross him much. They were polite to him—the kin of the drowned because they wanted the body and the crowd because they wanted to watch him work.

Well, after Titus got through talking with the shantyboatman, he'd say, "I figure he's up there in that eddy," or, "Hung under that snag down yonder." He'd look around and see if any women were in the crowd. Most commonly there were and Titus would march over and pick up his bag.

"Here a minute," he'd say to the men and boys while he opened the bag.

They all knew what to do. They got together and they made a tight ring around Titus so the women couldn't see through. They stood like that till he was ready.

It wasn't any time hardly before Titus was through. The ring would bust up and out would walk Titus in his bare feet and buttoning the top buttons of the red flannel underwear he wore to dive in. He'd stick his rubber plugs in his ears and take a coil of rope with a grapple hook tied to the end from his bag.

By that time somebody would have a skiff ready. Titus would step in it and pull off. He never would let a soul go with him. Everything had to be just so. He wouldn't trust anybody else but his own self.

Titus would paddle to the eddy or the snag and tie up. Then he'd stand up, hold his nose, and jump over. Sometimes he'd find the body the first whack. Other times he'd go up and down, up and down all day before he nosed it out. Maybe it'd take days. But sooner or later, Titus would haul it in. He knew



every eddy, snag, and backwash for miles and he'd find the body somewhere or other. Yes, when they called in Titus Millsaps, the undertaker could start laying out his tools. It was just a matter of time.

Summer was Titus' rush season because there's more people on the river then than in winter and fall. He couldn't get his mind on talking to the loafers in fine warm weather. He just

set tilted there in front of the livery stable with his ears propped for the word to come. Sometimes he'd have seven or eight calls a summer and clear as much as a thousand dollars in rewards. Even when he was getting along in years and had the rheumatism, he still kept at his diving for dead bodies. He was a little slower about it, but he always got the body.

Now, Titus' livery stable business got to losing custom pretty bad when automobiles came in. Every year it lost just a little bit more. Titus wouldn't give it up. No, he swore the hoss was coming back. He vowed people would soon get tired of being plagued with automobiles. So he set out in front of his livery stable watching the river and cussing the garage next door.

"Some of these days, and it won't be long," he'd say to the loafers, "I'm going to have the happiness of seeing that dad-burned nest of tin stinkbugs shut down. You mark my words on it!"

Of course he owned the garage too. He'd built it and hired a man to run it so as not to lose out all the way, but he never would set foot inside it his own self. Well, the garage did fair business and made money. But it just about evened up what the livery stable lost. So it seemed like Titus was always financially in need of money. The rewards for finding drowned people came in mighty handy.

Old Man Smothers, who I guess knew Titus about as well as anybody in town, used to say, "You know, it sure is a queer thing about Titus. Say somebody whose folks have money is drowned and they offer a reward. Well, Titus just can't find that body. Then they raise the reward and still Titus can't find the body. Pretty soon the reward goes as high as it's likely to go. Then, by doggies, in comes Titus lugging the body. Now, far

be it from me to say he anchors the body out till the market hits the top, *but . . . !*" And Old Man Smothers would cock his head on one side and give a deep wink.

Titus did charity work too. He used to say, "I'm here to serve the public, day or night, fair weather and foul. I can be reached by the poor and rich the same."

He was telling the truth. He'd come just as fast for a poor drowned fisherman as for the richest man that ever jumped off the bridge. Poor people knew it and appreciated it. Why, when Joe Tucker fell off the wharf and was drowned and his family didn't have a rusty copper to pay for it, Titus dived right in. It wasn't hardly any time at all before he had him out. It was a big comfort to poor old Mrs. Tucker and she told everybody so. She says, "It just goes to show you." Everybody else said the same.

Only one place where Titus drew the line. He wouldn't dive for niggers. He said it was hard enough to see a white man on the bottom of that muddy river. He said it just wasn't any use at all to look for a nigger down there. He said, "If a nigger goes out in a boat or swimming in the river expecting to get *my* services, well he might just as well get out of the river. He might just as well go home, *that's* all."

Well, Titus must have been crowding sixty years old when young Arthur Binkley, the hardware people's boy, jumped off the railroad bridge half a mile above the wharf. It was cold weather and rainy and everybody knew Titus was too old and stove up with rheumatism to go down in the water then. So nobody called him.

But Titus saw a commotion of skiffs on the water up there and hopped in his sully and came. He was hurt in his pride because they hadn't called him, but he didn't say a thing. He

just got into his red flannels and paddled down to the eddy where he thought he'd find young Arthur. The Binkleys had offered a hundred dollars cash and every riverman for miles around was out to get it. So when they saw which way Titus Millsaps was going, twenty and more skiffs strung out behind him.

Titus reached the eddy first and got ready to go over. He was standing up in his red flannels when the nearest riverman yelled at him.

"You better not!" he says. "That water's like ice, old man. You won't find him noways."

"Thieves, liars, and rogues!" was all that Titus said. He just shook his fist and went over—*kerplunk!*—and sunk out of sight.

Well, the skiffs pulled up and waited. They waited five minutes. No Titus.

They waited some more.

No sign of Titus.

So then the whole works and compuddlement of them started poking boat hooks down in the water. They kept working till dark. It didn't do any good. They couldn't find a trace of Titus Millsaps nor young Arthur Binkley.

The next day the Binkleys raised the reward to two hundred dollars. The livery stable and garage offered ten dollars for Titus.

Four days afterwards the Binkleys offered three hundred and the livery stable and garage twenty.

Every fisherman for miles turned out looking. They dragged the river and dived. They shot off dynamite to make the bodies come up, but all it did was kill some fishes. People were looking for twenty miles down the river or more.



Finally the Binkleys made it four hundred and the garage and livery stable made it twenty-five.

On a Saturday the loafers were setting in front of Titus' livery stable, talking and feeling low. They had hung up some crepe on the sign, but not on the garage because they figgered Titus wouldn't have liked that if he was alive.

Well, along about noon a nigger let out a whoop down on the wharf. Everybody ran down there and looked where he was pointing.

"Look at dem two things out there!" the nigger said. The nigger looked and everybody else looked. Then, first thing they knew, the nigger yelled and turned around and ran like a colt.

Well, everybody stood there bug-eyed, watching those two things bobbling along in the current. They came whirling into the eddy around the foot of the wharf. Turning around slower and slower, Titus and young Arthur grounded there among the skiffs. They were all tangled together in a rope with a grapple on its end. Titus' red flannels were faded some, but still pretty red.

So the boys pulled them out and untangled them and carried them into the livery stable and called the undertaker. Then they just stood out front waiting.

Old Man Smothers came down Front Street. He stopped and started in jawing before anybody could say anything to him.

"Just been up on the Square," he says, "and heard the latest word. Yep, if old Titus was alive now, it'd be about time for him to bring the Binkley boy in, because his family just let it out that they don't aim to raise the reward no higher."

Somebody poked Old Man Smothers and pointed inside.

He turned and looked. He grunted like he'd been kicked hard. Then he opened his mouth, took a deep breath, and didn't say nothing at all.

The rest of the boys said the same.

*James R. Aswell*





### *Fiddler's Dram*

TALK ABOUT YOUR FIDDLERS—WHY, IN YONDER'S times we *had* fiddlers around here! None of your modern-age make-shifters that whip all the tunes till a body can't tell "Rabbit in the Pea Patch" from "Bull Amongst the Yearlings." Nor in them days they didn't make the fiddle sound like a jug full of hungry mosquitoes, neither! No siree! They just made the sweetest music this direction from heaven.

And in all yonder time I verily know there never was a finer hand to fiddle than Ples Haslock. He fiddled for all the square dances and play-parties anywheres around. No gathering of whatever kind amounted to much unless Ples was there, with his long solemn face and them light blue far-shot eyes, patting his foot and ripping away on his fiddle and calling the figgers.

*"Gents, hands in your pockets, back to the wall,  
Take a chew tobaccer and balance all!  
Ladies, do-se-do with the gents you know,  
Swing your corner and-a here we go!"*

He wasn't no old billygoat fiddler with crazy ways and a cracked voice. He was right young and by nature handsome. All the girls sighed, but Ples just didn't deal in women. He said, "Give me my fiddle and a place to pat my foot and they's nothing else in creation I crave." His daddy had got an old fiddlebox in a bunch of junk he'd traded from an Irish Gypsy for a nag is how Ples got started fiddling. He made his own strings out of catamount guts and the bow from the tail hairs of mare colts. Then he teach'd his self to fiddle till he laid it plumb over any of the old heads.

Since his daddy died, Ples lived at home by his self over near Post Oak, but he was a man that just didn't stay home much. He liked to ramble and visit around. Wheresoever he went, he was twice as welcome as anybody. He had word of all the latest things and happenings and he could keep a family spell-charmed to the midwarp of the night telling tales he made out of his head. He'd make the young'uns elder-shoot flutes and cornstalk fiddles, and, when asked to, he'd get out his own old fiddle and make it talk—I *mean* talk! You'd sweared to hear it that there was a live mockingbird singing in that fiddlebox or a buzzing cowfly or maybe a little peeping chicken. He could take and mock cats fighting or old gossip women gabbing till folks fell in the floor laughing. And he could fiddle the old tunes to where the meanest man in the county would break under and cry all down his face.

Nothing was too good for Ples Haslock when he visited around. He was welcomed by high and low as long as he wanted to stay and they begged him to stop longer when he fancied to go.

They had fiddling contests then, but it got so there wasn't a heap of contest to them. Everybody come to know that Ples



Haslock was going to win hands down. He always walked off with the gallon jimmyjohn of fine oak-chartered drinking whiskey they give for the prize. Why, it come to the point where they had to give another jug for second prize or they'd never had nobody in the contest but Ples. The other fiddlers only tried to outbeat each other. None of them had any show at all against Ples and they purely all knowed it.

So what happened one time but the wall of the jail at Dukedom fell out and the county court didn't have no money in the poke to fix it. When the squires figgered to get up a fiddling contest to raise the money, everybody says, "We'll have to send over to Post Oak and tell Ples Haslock and notify him."

Coot Kersey was the best fiddler near and around Dukedom and Coot says, "He may can't come this time. I hear he's a sick man. Down with heart dropsy is what I hear."

"Don't you *hope* so, Coot?" they says, and laughed him to a fair deadstand.

The County Court Clerk says, "I've got to drive my rig over to Post Oak on business tomorrow. I'll tell Ples and notify him."

So the County Court Clerk dropped his hitching block in front of Ples Haslock's the next day and called, "Heyo! You to home, Ples?"

Nobody answered him, so he walked through the weeds to the house, a one-room shack that looked like a good strong puff of air would blow it over. The clapboards was dropping off and the shingles curled up every which way like the feathers of an old Dominecker hen.

When the County Court Clerk climbed the shaky steps to the porch, Ples woke up inside and said, "Who's there?"

"Just me," says the County Court Clerk and give out his name.

"Well, come right in!" says Ples. "Ain't seen you since I don't rightly know when. How're you folks living at Dukedom?"

"Pretty fair, Ples. Can't complain."

The room was one big clutteration of old clothes, pots and pans, and junk, and Ples was setting up in a mess of dirty comforts on his bed at the far end.

Everything else might be knocking around just anywheres it lit, but Ples didn't care a whet so long as his fiddle was safe. He never let go of that fiddle—had it now beside him in bed, running his fingers over it like you'd pet a child. It give the County Court Clerk a shock to see how like death Ples looked, green-faced and shrunk, with big brown liver splotches on his face and hands. He had gone down mightily, but his eyes was just as blue-bright as ever. His nose looked natural. It always had been big and bony.

County Court Clerk said, "How're you feeling, Ples?"

"Well," says he, "I could say I was down in the back. I could say I don't know what I'd do if it wasn't for them kind people that neighbor me round. I could say it and I *do* say it. Three times a day some good neighbor woman brings me some nice something to eat and sets a spell talking. The menfolks come over at night and see that I ain't fell out of bed to my harm. Between whiles, I just lay around and play my fiddle."

"I'd heared you was ailing," says the County Court Clerk.

"It's for a fact," says Ples. "Heart dropsy runs in the Haslock line. Here of late I've been having night flotations too. But seems like I'm coming around some. Aim to be up and on my feet soon."

The County Court Clerk was of two minds whether to tell him about the contest but now he figgered it wouldn't do no harm. So he come out about the jail wall and the contest and

notified Ples that it would be held at the Dukedom school two weeks come a Monday.

Minute he heard that, Ples peartened up mightily. "I'll be there!" he says. "When the roll is called at Dukedom, Ples Haslock will be there certain sure!"

So the County Court Clerk visited awhile and then had to be on his way. "We'll be looking for you, Ples," he says.

"Get your fiddler's dram ready," says Ples, "for I virtuously aim to win it."

Well, the night of the contest most everybody in the county come to Dukedom in their Sunday best and tramped into the schoolhouse and settled in their seats. Everybody was in a looking-forward mood. You know how them gatherings are. A heap of shouting and high joking back and forth. Old gossip-trots running from one group to another with the latest. Young bloods standing around talking loud and the girls giggling and sneaking looks at them. Little mustards running up and down the aisles, snatching things from each other, having rooster-fights at the back of the hall, and raising a general rumpus. Little girls setting with their folks and sticking out their tongues at the boys when nobody was looking. Babies crying, people coughing, and the lye soap smell pretty strong.

The crowd was getting restless. Little boys, and some not so little, begun whistling and banging desks for things to get started.

Old Judge Huley Dunlap was the chairman of the committee and he come out on the stage and give out that the contest was fixing to start. Then he put on his glasses and read off the names of the fiddlers, seven in all.

When he got through, everybody commenced yelling, "How about Ples Haslock?"



"Well," says Judge Dunlap, "we'd hoped he could make it, but till yet he ain't showed up. He's been laid up in bed lately and I reckon he couldn't stand the trip over here from Post Oak. Anybody that wants to can get their admission back at the door."

Some folks grumbled but everybody stayed set and things quieted down.

So the seven fiddlers come out on the stage and taken seats and the contest was ready to break out.

Everybody knowed that five of the seven fiddlers might as well not have got in the contest. They was plain everyday set-in-a-rocker-and-scratch-aways. The contest was between Coot Kersey and Old Rob Reddin, number six and seven. With Ples Haslock down and out, Coot and Old Rob was the best fiddlers you could find anywhere around and about in the county. Everybody figgered Old Rob was the likely one, not because his fiddling was fancier than Coot's but because of the crazy way he carried on.

The five sorry fiddlers sawed away and got through without nobody paying attention in special. Coot and Old Rob would do the real fiddling and they come last.

There was a big laugh when Coot's turn come. Everybody always felt like laughing when they saw Coot. The way his head bobbed up and down on his long red wrinkled neck with every step he took, the way his chin ran back and his nose beaked out, and the way a long tag of his hair kept wattling down to the bridge of his nose put everybody in mind of an old turkey gobbler. Coot gobbled when he talked, too.

But one thing sure—Coot could make a fiddle sing. He was the dead serious kind of fiddler. Had to have his fiddle set just right across his knees before he'd commence, but let him get

started and he sure fiddled. His piece was "Leather Britches." He went at it like a boy killing snakes, whipping and scraping away and stamping his foot till he'd worked up a pouring sweat. When he'd finished, he was as limp as an old rag. He drew down a powerful claphand from the listeners.

The gathering set up smart when it come Old Rob Reddin's turn and he hobbled to the front of the stage. Folks started grinning before he'd done a thing. Old Rob was as funny to look at as Coot Kersey, but not because he put you in mind of no bird or animal. He was a lard-fat little man and when he walked his stomach wobbled in front of him. He'd never been heard to open his mouth without some real funny humor-saying rolling out. If ever by accident he was to have a mournful spell and say anything serious, people would've laughed at him just the same. Seeing Old Rob meant laughing like falling in the creek meant getting wet.

So Old Rob he plumped his self down in the fiddler's chair. He laid his fiddle on his lap and winked at his wife that was setting down front. All on a sudden he yelled, "Hold to your seats, folks! I'm driving wild!"

He give the gathering time to stop howling. Then he lit in fiddling "Hell Turned Loose in Georgia." The way he carried on, a body'd thought he was having some sort of fit if they hadn't knowed better. When he drew a high note he'd open his mouth wide, run his eyebrows to his hairline, and shoot his neck up. On low ones he'd bend almost to the floor. Every once in so often he'd throw his bow into the air. While it was coming down he'd bawl out things like "*Eating* hogeye!" and "I *love* chittlins!" and "Ladies, where *was* your man last Saturday night!"

Everybody was still shouting and stamping and whistling

when Old Rob come down off the platform. No need to hold the jimmyjohn over the different fiddlers' heads to see who'd get the most applauding. A deaf and dumb blind man could easy see Old Rob had that contest.

Like everybody, the judges was so taken up with watching Old Rob cut capers because he'd won that they didn't see Ples Haslock till he'd already started playing. The first anybody knowed he was anywheres about was when a fiddle begun on the stage.

The crowd looked to see who it was, and there sat Ples in the chair with his fiddle across his knees, his bow weaving over the strings, and his foot patting steady. Yes, there he set with his eyes shut and his head nodding in time with his foot.

It was a dumbfounder, all right. For just a minute the gathering thought maybe they was seeing things. But there he was, Ples Haslock, all drawn and pale from sickness, fiddling in the contest just a snatch before it was too late.

The minute folks seen it *was* Ples, the hall got still as time in a grave.

It was about nine o'clock when Ples started in and he fiddled over an hour. It was straight honest fiddling—none of your stunts on the strings like Coot Kersey, none of that loud foolblabber that was Old Rob Reddin's stock in trade.

Folks there had heard fiddlers that could make them laugh and fiddlers that could make them cry, but Ples this night didn't do neither one. When you listened to him you nearly forgot who you was. You just set limp in your seat while your mind tried to remember something cloudy and away far off, something you'd never really seen or done.

Ples played "Poor Wayfaring Stranger" and "The Two Sisters" and "The Elfin Knight" and a dozen or more.

When Ples Haslock did stop, it verily did look like the crowd was going to tear the whole place down and scatter the pieces. They heaved to their feet and whooped, whistled, screamed, and bellered and hammered on the desks. Kept it up while Judge Huley Dunlap handed Ples the jimmyjohn of fine red drinking whiskey and said, "I hereby present and award to Ples Haslock this prize which may he enjoy it as much as the good people of Dukedom done his fiddling." Leastways they seen Judge Dunlap's mouth flapping and knowed he was saying something like that.

Well, Ples stood up, holding his fiddle and his bow under his left arm and heisting the jimmyjohn with a crooked finger of his right hand. He flipped that jimmyjohn over his shoulder, jerked the corncob out of the mouth of it with his teeth, and taken a long pull, his fiddler's dram.

Right then come a crash. For the chair, the jimmyjohn and Ples and his fiddle all landed in a heap on the floor.

Man, woman, and child run up onto the stage. But Judge Huley Dunlap made them stand back. "Get a doctor!" he says. "This man is done for, or near it. I can't feel no heart-beat at all."

So they hushed down and stood looking at Ples where he laid there on the stage.

"Think of it!" they says. "Poor Ples coming thirty miles to Dukedom with the last life in him just to win this contest!"

"He sure was a man that liked to fiddle!"

"Would you look at his clothes," says somebody. "All covered with clay, they are. From the looks of it, he must walked all the way and through the swamp at that."

They kept saying, "It's the beat of all ever happened in Dukedom!"

Before long the doctor come hustling in and knelt down and examined over Ples. He said, "How'd he get in here?"

So they told him. Judge Dunlap says, "He just keeled over dead before our eyes, poor man."

"Keeled over my granny!" says the doctor. "This here man has been dead for forty-eight hours at the very least. And from the clay he's got on his clothes, I'd say buried, too."

*James R. Aswell*





## *Pretty Baby*

LET A BUNCH BE SETTING AROUND TELLING hunting tales and he could always tell one better. Like the time Alec Barrs told about his dog jumping a big rabbit up on the ridge, the biggest rabbit he'd ever seen—but it got away.

"'Tain't nothing to the size of what Pretty Baby can do," Windy Peevyhouse said as usual. "Why, no more than last week that dog jumped a rabbit over close to Littleton Lake, and Pretty Baby must of knowed I was a far piece away for he just treed that cottontail up a tree and stood there a-baying and a-wagging his tail to let me know what he'd done."

Him telling outlandish things like that for the truth was what got him the name Windy. He was always blowing off at the mouth and making his self the laughingstock of Littleton's Cross Roads and further away than that. But people sniggering at him didn't stop him none. Seemed to make him worse.

Old Man Abb Littleton would speak up sometime like the time he said to Windy about trapping, "There's them as says yore ketch-dog trees them varments in a trap you've set, Windy." And Old Man Littleton laughed fit to kill.

Abb could say most anything he wanted to just anybody.

He owned most of the land holdings thereabouts and the store too. So nearly everybody generally owed him for something and had to be beholden to him.

But Abb nor nothing couldn't stop Windy from breezing off about his dog, Pretty Baby. Claimed he was the best retriever that ever brung in a piece of game. Of course Windy always done too much talking for his own good too. Like when he told about Pretty Baby retrieving the duck on Littleton's Lake. Now Abb Littleton was fonder of that lake and the ducks and the fishes he'd stocked it with than all his other holdings. He didn't like no meddling in his lake nor anywheres about.

"You shoot a duck over my lake again," he told Windy, "and I'll law you to the last frazzling law court in the land. I'll do it if you fish a fish out of there, either," Abb says good and loud. "That goes for the rest of you-ens, too. And the first time I ketch that ketch-dog around my lake I aim to—well, that ketch-dog will ketch his self some cold death, that's all."

Now Windy didn't know nothing more about fishing than a frog knows about bed sheets, and if he'd thought of fishing in the lake before then, didn't nobody know about it. But right soon after Abb Littleton dared him to fish in the lake, Windy was seen to be a-digging red worms. Folks knowed he was going fishing and they thought they knowed where.

"Ain't you ketching any, Windy?" Old Man Sam Burley asked him once.

"Won't bite them red worms, Sam," says Windy. "Old Man Littleton shore as anything feeds them fish of his something."

"Can't you ketch none a-tall?" said Old Sam.

Windy says, "Oh, just some little minners about fitten for a cat. I am shore fish hongry too! Ain't you, Sam?"

"You bet I am," says Sam.

"What's the best way you know to fish, Sam?" Windy asks. "Dynamite."

"Dynamite!" says Windy. "And have Old Abb Littleton shooting our britches off? You shore are up the wrong tree this time, Sam. He'd hear the rumpus of the dynamite and how would we git any fish and him coming to his lake like a shot?"

Sam thought and then he says, "I allow we might do it on a day the same time of a thunder storm. Of a nighttime would be better to do dynamiting. I figger it wouldn't come as near being heard by so many. Wish that lake was four miles away instead of just one."

That's how Windy and Sam skummed up that scheme. But they had to wait. Seemed like there was more fair weather for a spell than anybody ever remembered of for a long time.

So Windy kept on bragging about what a fine retrieving dog old Pretty Baby was. He showed everbody around Old Abb Littleton's store, just with sticks and things, how Pretty Baby never got too wore out to bring back whatever it was he throwed away. His tales got bigger about the game meat he killed and Pretty Baby dragged in to him. The game got bigger with every kill too. So folks just got so they didn't take no pains to listen special to what Windy said. They knowed he snuck off most days in the late after-dinner part of the day with his gun and dog and always brought in game meat. But nobody never heard a shot, nor he didn't ever buy no gun cartridges from Abb Littleton's store, which was right queer, it being the nearest for ten miles away.

Well, a cloudy day finally come along. Windy and Sam was out around eyeing the sky and whittling around like they didn't have a care in the world, which they didn't much.



"How many fish you figger we'll git, Windy?" says Sam.

Windy says, "I reckon on a big wagon load. Ought to seine that many."

"Them people over at the county seat," says Sam, "ought to pay a good price too. Them having so much money and all. Don't you think so?"

"Yeah," says Windy. "Well, we'll go over, come the first good start of rain, and even if it don't thunder none, maybe Old Abb Littleton will think it's thunder. That's all we aim to fool."

So about dark, here they went, Sam and Windy, hotfooting it over to the lake, only they never went in that direction. They went over towards the Barfieldses' place like they was just rambling around, and Pretty Baby tagging along under Windy's heels as usual. They circled around till they come to the lake. About that time the fireworks started in the clouds.

Windy says, "Just like as if we'd planned it to the minute, Sam."

"Yeah," says Sam, "the Lord's on our side even if Old Abb Littleton ain't. I bet he'll just swell up and bust when he finds out about his fish being killed and sold."

"After all this planning I sort of hate to do it to him in a way, Sam," says Windy.

Sam give a big hoot. "Not me, not to Abb Littleton! He owns more than the law ought to allow anyway. Besides, he dared us. Can't *nobody* git away with that, can they, Windy?"

"No," says Windy, "nobody can't. He brought it stump down on his self."

Well they got out that dynamite stick and fixed it all up with a fuse like they wanted it and flung it over in the lake.

Then their eyes popped out of their heads.



Pretty Baby, that lop-eared long-legged retrieving fool of a dog, dove off into the lake and started swimming straight as a good old dog can swim right towards the place where the dynamite had struck on the water.

"My Lord!" yells Windy. "If that don't beat a pig a-pecking! Run for yore life. That fool ketch-dog aims to bring back that dynamite!"

"It will blow us both clear to the pearly gates too!" says Sam.

Well, them men got away from that lake a heap faster than

they ever left any place before, and Sam shied of Windy like he had a case of lepersy.

"That dog ain't going to be looking for me," thinks Sam, "because I ain't never taught him to bring me no sticks. I shore don't want this one he's a-bringing!"

Pore old Windy like to of run his self to death in that minute or two. Pretty Baby was a-doing his best to catch up with Windy.

Then a sad thing happened. That dynamite done what it was supposed to do. But not in the lake. And the last Windy saw of his retrieving dog was his hind legs waving farewell.

Well, the next morning Old Abb's store opened up uncommonly soon. And, naturally, Windy wanted to be there and about to see if anybody had learned anything of what happened.

So he went creeping in the store sort of hacked-like. And, as common, the whole frazzling bunch of the usual lie-swappers was gathered up.

"Where's yore dog, Windy?" Old Man Littleton says, puffing on his corn cob pipe like as if he was awful wise about something.

"Pore old faithful Pretty Baby," says Windy. "He was retrieving in a cub of a painter last night and the mama painter come along and got mad and et him up. There ain't even a piece left of him to bury. Pore old faithful dog!" moaned Windy, and everbody knowing they wasn't no painters left around in these parts.

"That's shore bad about yore dog, Windy," says Abb. "I know you must be some put out and sad about him."

Old Abb piddled around behind the counter and then come out to where Windy set.

"Because I know you feel so bad," he says, "I aim to give you this mess of catfish I fished out of the lake last night. It will make you feel some better. And I want you to know I think a heap of any dog that can put up such a fight with a she-painter and make her roar like that one did last night."

Still a-piddling around not looking at nobody as he talked, Old Abb was.

"It would of made a body think they was dynamite about somewheres," he says. "But, of course, they wasn't because ain't been none sold—except one stick of Sam Burley more than eight weeks ago. That was to blow up a stump, wasn't it, Sam?"

Well all the time Windy was squirming around and finally he couldn't stand it no longer.

"Abb," he says, "seeing as you given me these fishes, I can't bear to lie to you. That's just the way it was. I mean Pretty Baby was blowed up with dynamite just like you done reasoned out someways. I was a-lying all the time, but I never wanted you fellers to know that I same as kilt my own ketch-dog—me a-teaching him all them retrieving tricks. Why, Pretty Baby thought it was just another stick to play a game with, that dynamite. Pore old Pretty Baby."

Windy heaved a sigh and says, "And this morning it was shore lonesome a-gitting up with Pretty Baby not here around a-licking me in the face to unawaken me. But before I got my pants on, I heard a lumbering falling racket in the top of the old horseapple tree next on to the cowshed and when I looked out the door, there was old Pretty Baby out there with the prettiest little old pink-faced angel you ever seen or heard tell of in his jaws. He'd retrieved it in just like always when he ketches meat for me."

"A angel!" the whole bunch of them lie-swappers bellered out.

"Where is it now?" Old Abb says, all the time gitting up off the nail keg he was setting on like as if he aimed to go see for his self.

"Well sir," says Windy, "that angel and Pretty Baby just played around the back lot and around like as if Pretty Baby was a-showing that little bitty thing all the chickens. And the old cow just mooed like she thought it was the doggonedest thing she ever seen and I reckon it was. Then, I swan if that angel didn't git Pretty Baby up on its back and the last I seen they was flying off the prettiest you ever seen. I reckon he must of taken a fancy to that ketch-dog of mine and was a-toting him back to wherever Pretty Baby had got him."



"A angel!" snorted Old Abb. "Aw git out, Windy!"

"A angel it was for fair!" says Windy. "All them that disbelieve can come up to the house and see the feathers that come out of them pretty little wings when it come through the limbs with my ketch-dog. Of course, some might say they was goose feathers. But they ain't. They's a angel's feathers for shore."

So after that folks just decided nothing wouldn't hack Windy for long.

*Julia Willhoit*



## *Mammy Wise*

FOR A CERTAIN, MAMMY WISE WAS THE MOST seeingest woman in the Valley or that ever lived.

She was a big woman, a tall woman, and had white hair as coarse as so much rope. She had black beady eyes and looked dark as an Injun. Nobody didn't know how old she was, because she was already living when everybody in the Valley was borned and she couldn't tell nobody her age because she didn't know it her own self.

Folks come for miles around for her to blow in the mouths of their young'uns to cure the rash. Mammy claimed she was borned after her pappy died was the reason she could do that. Nor curing rash wasn't all she could do. Folks come from clear over in the next county to git Mammy Wise to sooth up something that was troubling them. And she always spelled up the truth too. Like the time before the Civil War when she went

into a fit and spelled up the whole dang war. Said she seen a star from the north sky travel clean acrost the heavens and run smack dab into a star in the south end of the sky.

"They is shore trouble a-brewing betwixt the North end of America and the South end of America," she said. "I done spelled it up and what I spell up always happens for a fact."

And that war *did* come for a fact, just like old Mammy Wise said.

People got to pestering her so about going into a trance to spell up something that was bothering them that Mammy got to charging. Not money, because folks in the Valley most never had none, but they fotched over maybe a gallon of lasses or a peck of taters or a turn of meal, and Mammy's cupboard was always fat with vittles on account of it.

Mammy always meant good when she spelled up things, but even the truth will hurt somebody sometimes. Like when Hog Bittle come from acrost the Valley a far piece to see Mammy and says, "I shore been hard hit, Mammy. I need yore seeing help the worst kind."

"Signs is right for soothing," says Mammy. "What lays on yore brain, Hog?"

"Well," says Hog, "I had nigh onto forty dollars of money tied up in a yarn sock and it sticking in under the old shuck bed me and Ida sleeps on. Now it's gone. See if you can spell up where it went to. I know I ain't spent it."

Well, old Mammy's eyes begun to git set in her head like as if she was dead and ripe to bury. Then her hands begun to shake and pretty soon, when she quit shaking and was almost as stiff as a corpse, she begun to mutter something nobody but a soothsayer knowed what it was.

Then she speaks out loud, "I see a woman with yellor hair



a-going to a shuck bed. She gits the money, but it ain't forty dollars. No it ain't but twenty-five there in the first place. It's a dark night. This yeller-hair woman puts the money in her bosom, sock and all. She slips down to the barn and gives it to a raggedy young feller with yeller hair, and he shore is lean looking too. And that's just where yore money went to for a certain."

Then Mammy shooked herself just like a dog a-shaking water and her eyes come back to their natural place. She says, "Did I help you out any, Hog?"

"Help me!" says Hog. "You shore did! I aim to go home and whup that woman of mine. I doggies, I'll frail her with a limb for handing out my money to that yeller-headed hossthief of a fugitive from justice of a son of hers!" And Hog he went off a-spitting fire.

Wasn't nothing Mammy could say that would tame him down neither, and the very next day when Old Lady Allen went santering over to the Bittles' to borrry some lard or whatever, she found that Ida was some stove up.

So after that old Mammy tried to be keerful what all she spelled up. "It's like as if I'd done the flogging myself," says she. "But what I see—I see!"

And folks noticed she did sort of ease up on things after that. She started spelling up mostly good things and trying to help them that was troubled in mind.

Like when Miss Ruthie Bottoms went over calling on Mammy. Miss Ruthie was one of the old-maidest old maids ever was. So Mammy seen her ambling towards her shanty in the cove and knowed she was in for a evening of listening to griping and complaining.

"I aim and intend," says Mammy, "to put a little hope in

that old maid's heart. No harm in that, surely now. Just pretending so as she'll sort of have something to live for."

Well, Miss Ruthie Bottoms come a-walking in the house as stiff like as if ever joint in her body was about to crack in two, which was the way she always walked.

Mammy Wise says, "What's on yore brain today, Ruthie?"

Ruthie says, "Just worry and lonesomeness is all. I know I'm the lonesomest person ever lived. All the other gals got men but me. Not a mortal soul to be my company since Ma and Pa died off. Guess it's the Lord's will for me to live and die alone."

"Now, Ruthie," says Mammy, "who's the best soothsayer in this Valley? Who, I ask you, who?"

"Why you are, Mammy, for a certain," says Ruthie.

Mammy she then says, "Set right where you are and I'll see what I can spell up." So Mammy Wise went through all her doings of blinking her eyes and them setting in her head and her a-shaking all over.

Miss Ruthie was just aching for her to start telling her about a man, and she done it, Mammy did. She says, "Go alone of a dark night when they ain't no moon to Lovers' Leap where the Injun lovers jumped off once, and set there until a man comes along. He's yore man for shore."

Then Mammy blinked her eyes and unstiffened herself. Her fit was over and wasn't no use in gitting her to trance on that matter no more. When she was done, she was done.

"Mammy," says Miss Ruthie, "I'm afeard to go to Lovers' Leap of a dark night by myself."

"You want you a man, don't you, Ruthie?" says Mammy.

"I mighty well do, Mammy," says Miss Ruthie.

"Well, go after him then," says Mammy. "Just take him

unawares. After all, the other wimmen just surprise the men into marrying up with them. Many's a man unawakened to find his self wedded. It's the same thing."

So Miss Ruthie went away right peart. She didn't mosey along like always. And she got a almanac from the store man to see when the first dark unmoonless night was due.

Now, truth to tell, Mammy thought Miss Ruthie would just sort of wish she had the nerve to go to Lovers' Leap of a dark night. Miss Ruthie never had the nerve to do nothing of a dark night, much less go out on the wild mountainside. Mammy figgered it would keep her hopes going and do no harm.

But come the plumb pitch-dark night and Mammy Wise was wrong for once and not much wrong neither as you will see. Miss Ruthie put on her prettiest bonnet and did for shore start to Lovers' Leap. She was so scared she'd run awhile and then stop and listen if anybody was about or any varmint. When she got near to the rock that stuck away out over the Valley and that folks called Lovers' Leap, she runned faster than ever before. And then Miss Ruthie seen a shadder on the rock which hadn't ought to be there. It was a man-shape shadder and pretty soon hit lit up a pipe and Miss Ruthie knowed it was a flesh and blood living man.

Now, it happened that when this here dark unmoonless night settled down, Mammy Wise got uneasy. "Reckon that feather-headed Ruthie would go out yan to Lovers' Leap?" she says to herself. And finally she knowed she wouldn't have no peace about it. So Mammy just put on her shawl and hurried over to Miss Ruthie's. Sure enough Miss Ruthie was gone.

"If that don't just beat the old hen a-loping!" says Mammy. So Mammy Wise cut through the backtracks and cross-timbers



to Lovers' Leap to bring Miss Ruthie back before the night air give her her death.

And just as the old lady got near to Lovers' Leap, she heard Miss Ruthie scream and a man beller and a mule *he-honker*. And then there was the sound of hoof-tracks a-flying down the mountainside.

Mammy was too dumbfounded to holler out anything to stop Miss Ruthie from being kidnapped. She was the most took back she had ever been in her whole life and tried to follow which way Miss Ruthie and that man went but they was too fast for her and got clean out of hearing.

She went back to the Valley settlement right fast for an old woman that didn't even know how old she was and pounded on ever door anywheres until she roused up the biggest posse that ever ganged up to git man or beast.

"Can't you tell us nothing more than that, Mammy?" the men says. "Howcome her to go over there noways? Sounds like some of yore funny work, Mammy."

The looks they give her was enough to kill her dead. Mammy was scared to tell the folks she had been just making like she had spelled up a man for Miss Ruthie. She knowed they might flog her like they done to witches years ago, specially if Miss Ruthie was any harmed. She said she didn't know a thing. But she rid out with the posse.

Well, that posse combed them mountains from the far side to the back side. And no Miss Ruthie.

"Pore Miss Ruthie," Mammy said. "She always wanted a passel of men chasing after her and she's shore got them doing it now. But, pore thing, she can't enjoy it. Most likely she's dead and throwed in some lonesome hole by now."

Mammy and the posse tracked mule tracks here and yon



and still never found no tall lanky lean pore skinny figger of pore Miss Ruthie stretched out somewheres with her brains battered out with a rock like they was looking for.

Mammy was feeling sorrier and sorrier that she had tried to help up Miss Ruthie's heart.

Well, the posse and Mammy they hunted the rest of the night and till near midday the next day and then frazzled out and decided to go back in towards the Valley and git a bite to eat.

"Maybe she's broke loose from that thieving woman-grabber," they said, "and got home herself footback." But wasn't much hope and it was shore a sorrowful bunch that rid back up to Miss Ruthie's cabin.

"Smoke's coming out of the chimney like it was last night, like as if the fire is a-waiting for her," Mammy says sort of absent-minded to herself.

So some of the posse heard her. "Like last night, Mammy?" they says. "Was you over to her house last night?" And Mammy just decided to tell it all.

"Let's go inside and set a spell," she says. "I'm about winded now, and hungry, too. Then I got something to say, folks. A sorry mess I've made of things. A mighty sorry mess."

Then Mammy opened the door to Miss Ruthie's cabin and let out a screech like a painter and looked like as if she'd seen a ghost. For there set Miss Ruthie on the sparking chair she'd owned all them years without nobody to spark with.

Leastways a man set on the sparking chair and Miss Ruthie in his lap.

"Land a-living!" says Mammy. "If you knowed how we been scouring the woods for yore dead body and you here a-carrying on with a man like this! It's a double twisted

shame, that's all!" And Mammy would've said some more but Miss Ruthie aimed to have *her* say.

Just sassy as can be, she says, "You can call me Miz Ab Lingle, Mammy. I've a right good right to set on this here man's lap. Him and me got wedded over at the county seat just like you said, Mammy. You shore spelled up a man for me, for a certain! We rid all night and all morning to git back here and we aim to have a house-warming tonight for shore."

"Well!" says Mammy. "Well! Make us acquainted with your man, Miz Ab Lingle."

"Wouldn't do no good," says Ruthie. "He's deaf and a mite nearsighted and he's still a little drunk. But that's his name, all right, because he had a letter in his pockets. He sobered up a little after we got hitched and said he losted his way is why he was at Lovers' Leap. Course, he don't know it was really you, Mammy, that spelled him to be there."

So Mammy Wise just drawed herself up proud-like and says, "I might've knowed it! Might've knowed this power of mine was too strong to be trifled with. It just taken the bit between its teeth and spelled up that man anyhow!"

Everybody in the whole Valley said it *was* a *mighty* power. It just *had* to be, they said, to sooth up a man that would marry Miss Ruthie Bottoms, drunk or sober.

And nobody couldn't deny Mammy Wise had done it.

*Julia Willhoit*





## *The Hag of Red River*

IT WAS AWAY BACK IN THE FIRST YEARS OF THE eighteen hundreds that Old John Bell and his family came from North Carolina to the Red River Country of Middle Tennessee. They made a regular caravan, a dozen big wagons loaded down with household things, children, and slaves, all pulling along the dusty weedy excuse for a pike-road that went north from Nashville towards the Kentucky line.

The country was still pretty wild. Hills thick with tremendous big oak trees and beeches and hickory and the Red River Bottoms with sycamore and sweet gum and water maple. Panther and black bear in the bottoms then. Catamount and deer and wild pigeons till you could kill them by the cart-load.

John Bell had been pretty well off in North Carolina and he aimed to be a big Somebody in the Red River settlement. He had land grants for a thousand acres along the river, a mile or two from where you'll find the town of Adams these

days, and he brought enough hard money to buy up more land around the place.

As soon as they reached their claims, the Bells and their slaves and the children got busy. They cleared away the trees and brush. They put up the finest house in the country, as strong as a fort with its squared cedar and black locust logs. A little way off they built a one-room schoolhouse for the children. Lucy Bell had given Old John nine boys. They went by the name of Jesse, John, Drewry, Benjamin, Zadoc, Richard, Williams, Joel, and Egbert. There were a couple of girls, too, named Esther and Betsy.

The Bells were industrious and mighty pious folks. They were right up front at every brush-arbor revival meeting that came along. John Bell was a power in the Baptist Church and he had a heavy hand against sin. A regular Old Testament Christian. Every day of the world Old John and his family said kneeling prayers three times—before breakfast and at dinner and supper. The children learned the Gospels by heart.

Well, it wasn't very long till Old John was just about the leader in everything around the Red River Country. He took his horse pistols and rode at the head of the posse whenever there was a horse-stealing, and horse-stealing was a plague just then. He put on his long blue split-bottom coat with the silver buttons and his beaver hat and his linen stock and made speeches at election time. And he made money hand over fist. Before long there wasn't a soul in the section could match him for wealth. He bought more and more land as fast as he could.

But Old John could make a mistake. He made one, a big one, when he closed a deal for some land with an old widow by the name of Kate Batts. Thereabouts they all said she

was a witch. Old John didn't take any stock in witches. When he saw a piece of good bottom land he wanted, he went after that bottom land. He went after it, mattered not if the Devil himself owned it. He jewed with this Batts woman and got the price he wanted and closed the deal.

Sometime later the old woman got to figuring and made up her mind that she'd come out at the little end of the horn. So she began fretting and stewing till it worked on her mind. Pretty soon she couldn't think about another thing. She started running around telling folks, "That Jack Bell cheated me in this business. He cheated me scandalous—me a poor widow with no husband or kin to take her part. But you just wait," she'd say, "and mark my words. I'll get even with him somehow. I'll get even if I have to come back from my silent grave to do it!"

Old John Bell never paid her the slightest mind. "Let them that make bargains stick to them," he said.

Finally Old Kate Batts died and was buried.

Soon after John Bell had the log schoolhouse built on his farm, along came a young man riding by the name of Richard Powell, and he was a schoolteacher. He was a likely looking young fellow and he answered Old John Bell's questions to his satisfaction. He was pious enough and letter-perfect in ciphering and fine handwriting. So John Bell took him on as schoolmaster. Told him he could live with the family. The neighbor people looked him over and decided he would do. They sent their children to him along with the Bell children and they paid him a little something for the work. Wasn't very long before Richard Powell was just the same as a member of the family. All the Bells liked him first rate. Mrs. Bell and the youngest girl, Betsy, were fond of him in particular.

Right after the schoolmaster got settled, all sorts of strange happenings began at the Bells'. They commenced hearing things. At first, just soft tappings in the walls like death-watch beetles make. Then little scratchings and whisperings you couldn't put a name to. Nobody gave much mind to it at first. But day by day and week after week the noises grew louder. They spread out over the house till the Bells had to allow something mighty queer was going on. At first they kept quiet about it. They were afraid the neighbors would laugh at them and say they'd gone crazy, the lot of them.

This went on for months. One summer evening Betsy and two or three friends went flower-gathering in the woods near the river. They didn't stay long. They came tearing back, all out of breath and scared near to fits. They told the beat- ingest story, vowed they'd seen a little green woman swinging by her hands from the limb of a locust tree. She'd bounced up and down, they said, and turned her face inside out at them. Her tongue hung out a yard and was black as a calf's tongue and she'd squeaked at them like a mouse and spit at them like a bobcat.

That selfsame night the noises at the Bell house took a new turn. At first it was thin like a boy learning to whistle through his teeth. In a day or so it sounded like a kitten mewling, and then like a soft whispering. All at once one night a sharp voice, a woman's voice that sounded like scratching a nail on glass, broke out of thin air and began reeling off passages of Scripture. One of the Bells asked the voice what it was.

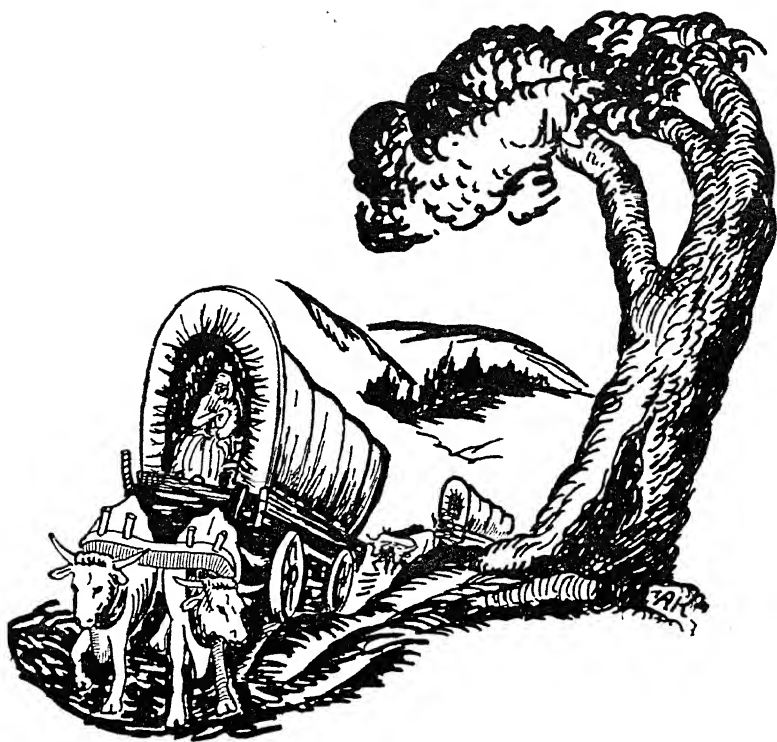
Pretty saucy, it came back, "I'm anything and everything, here and there and everywhere!" It whistled a tune for a while. Then it said, "I'm Old Kate Batts's witch, that's what I am."

Well, Old John Bell made his family and the slaves swear they'd keep quiet about the witch. He was bound he wouldn't let outsiders know about the family trouble. But you know how children and Negroes are. In just about a week the story was clickitty-clacking from every tongue in the Red River Country.

Of course, the Bells couldn't bold-out deny it. People that came visiting in the Bell home began hearing Old Kate's voice cut into a conversation. She'd scream at Old John Bell and call him names that'd turn a raftsmen's stomach. Some said they heard crazy guffaws coming from all over the house at once. Others heard her singing hymns. You know, a thing like that is hard to pass over. And first thing the Bells knew, Old Kate started pinching and slapping, and yanking hair. She got to throwing dishes. All this was mostly on Old John Bell and Betsy.

Like Old John had been afraid it would be, the whole community started laughing at him and the family. People came in droves to the house. They wanted a good time out of the show they thought the family was putting on. Not just farmers, but preachers and lawyers and merchants came. Men in all walks of life shoved in and some of them pretty hard-headed practical men. When word of the witch's doings spread around, people from the eastern states and even from New England showed up at the Bells'. Well, those people left convinced. Most of them left in a hurry and across lots!

To begin with, Old Kate was a rip-roarer when it came to religion. At scriptural arguments she couldn't be beat. She could shame even Sugg Fort and James Gunn, who were the main preachers in the Red River Country and mighty vessels of the Lord. There was a man by the name of Jeems Johnson



who couldn't string a sentence together without using the Bible as a crutch. Well, he had to stand back when Old Kate started raring. She'd squall, "Button up, Old Sugar-Mouth, and let somebody that *knows* the Book have a say!"

Let a revival or a prayer meeting come along and sure's a gun's iron they'd hear Old Kate's voice ripping away above the others in the Amen-corner. Witch or no witch, she could pray longer and sing louder than any preacher in the country. Wasn't a single wailer on the anxious-bench could stand against her at the holy laugh and the holy shout. When she started speaking in tongues, everybody else had to shut up. They say she sort of upset those meetings.

It got so that Old Kate took on herself the job of looking out for the public morals. Right then a sort of epidemic of righteousness started going in Robertson County. Horse thieves shied away from blooded mares like the mares would've shied at a white polecat on a night road. Didn't need locks on corncribs or smokehouses any longer. Sundays really got to be Sabbath then, with nobody daring to work or cook and everybody packing off to church. Grog-shop keepers got lank and hungry and evangelists grew butter-fat and had clean shirts every day. The scandal-trots held their tongues no matter if they were a-bust with gossip. Truth of it was that there was mighty little to gossip about. Husbands got mighty loving and faithful to their wives and trifling women just disappeared. Yes sir, and business deals were honest and politicians told the truth or kept their mouths sewed. Nobody could make a move that she didn't know about and tell it abroad.

Well, one evening a group of guests were sitting around on the front porch of the Bell home. So an argument started over whether a man is ever justified in stealing. One of the men spoke up and said the Mercy Seat couldn't hold a man to book for stealing a little bite to eat when he's hungry.

Right then Old Kate's voice broke in. "Have you eat them sheepskins yet?" she said.

And everybody there knew what became of a bale of sheepskins that had just been stolen from a neighboring farmer. The man left the country. Went to Arkansas, they say.

A lot of people in Robertson County got to believing that Old Kate was sent by heaven to rid the country of sin. And if that was so, what couldn't she do for the whole United States? I've heard that there was some pretty serious talk of

sending her to Congress. With Old Kate in Washington, all the trouble about admitting Missouri to the Union as a slave state would be settled in the twinkle of a bedpost! She'd pull a few blue Yankee noses and pinch a few Yankee rears and everything would be settled.

Nothing much came of the notion, though. Old Kate all of a sudden took a turn nobody'd looked for.

The Methodists and Baptists of the Red River section both planned to hold revival meetings on the same day, and Old Kate was just a glutton for preaching. So she went to the first half of the Methodist meeting and the second half of the Baptist and carried on her usual shouting and Amening. This time Old Kate had grabbed more than she could hold. She might have stood the Baptist baptising or the Methodist hoorah, but Methodist fire and Baptist water, both in the same day, were just too much for the poor old thing. She left the second meeting as scramble-witted as an old hen that's hatched a mess of guinea-fowls.

So what happened! Old Kate backslid, is what happened. She made off from meeting to John Gardner's stillhouse and she took on a buck-load of raw tanglefoot and got drunker than seven hundred fools. Went home and started acting up all over the place. She turned the Bell house out of windows and she yelled low-down songs and she swore red, white, and blue, and kicked and pinched and thumped John and Betsy Bell till they ran screaming in all directions. This went on till she passed out. From then on Old Kate was a regular hell-waker!

Not a day passed but her tinny voice dingdonged at John Bell, "I'm going to dog you to your grave and I'm going to blight the life of that dough-faced Betsy of yours!" She



whacked John Bell and Betsy black and blue. She stuck them with invisible needles and snatched food from the table and flung it in their faces. From sun-up till the dark of day she cussed and rared and tore around. Mind you, all this took place in front of dozens of witnesses outside of the Bell family. It wasn't just a story the Bells told.

The rest of the family mostly got off light. Maybe she'd box the boys' ears or tug Esther's hair, but usually she left them alone. Sometimes she acted like she was right fond of Mrs. Bell. When Mrs. Bell was sick, Old Kate sang hymns to her in a soft musical voice instead of that screech of hers, and Old Kate somehow had nothing but good to say of Richard Powell, the schoolmaster.

For a short time there, the Bells didn't have to put up with Old Kate alone. Kate had company, some visiting relatives named Blackdog, Cycography, Mathematics, and Jerusalem. Blackdog had a hoarse woman's voice and Mathematics talked like a whining girl. Jerusalem sounded like a bull-roarer and you just couldn't place Cycography. Sometimes Cycography sounded like a woman. Again Cycography sounded like a man. Cycography always sounded drunk. Day and night the five kept the Bell house in an uproar. They bickered and sang and fought like a bunch of tomcats in a sack. After a while Old Kate got tired of them. She said, "I like comers but I like goers better." So she ran Blackdog, Cycography, Mathematics, and Jerusalem away and they stayed away.

Time after time the Bells got fed up and planned to move to some other state. But every time the witch warned, "It'll do you no good, Old Jack Bell. I'll follow you to the ends of the earth. You ought to know that by now, you jingle-headed old fool!"

So the Bells just stayed on where they were and kept praying.

By and by Betsy grew into a fine pretty girl with blue eyes and goldenrod-yellow hair. Any number of young blades clamored around to keep her company. Even Schoolmaster Powell was bad hit. But young Joshua Gardner, one of the few men in Robertson County that Old Kate couldn't cow, was the one Betsy favored. Josh had several run-ins with the witch and Old Kate hated him almost as much as she did John Bell.

"Don't marry Josh Gardner!" she everlastingly rattled at Betsy. "You'll be woeful sorry if you do!"

Say Betsy set her head on going to a party with Josh. Well, Old Kate'd make it well-nigh impossible for her to get ready. She'd tangle that poor girl's long hair with burrs, and rip her frock, or gouge at her eyes. She wouldn't leave off until Betsy threw herself on the bed in a crying fit and promised not to go. Betsy could go wherever she wanted to with other boys and Old Kate wouldn't say pea-turkey to her about it.

They say Old Kate kept an extra special shindig for the pure-rendered pious folks that came to the Bell home. They'd be setting around talking religion when all at once the house would fill with a terrible smell. It was so bad that everybody would skip out into the open air, gasping and coughing for breath. Then Old Kate would sing out, "Well I declare, bretheren! First time I ever see folks before as couldn't put up with the odor of their own sanctity!"

Now, there were lots of people that just swore they'd seen Old Kate. Some said she was like a shadow on the wall—a tiny hopping little old woman shadow—or a big black hound. Others said she was like a mule with a human face or a queer

bird that was larger than an eagle. Some saw her as a rabbit that sat up and laughed when it was shot at and a good many said she was an old hag in a great tremendous poke-bonnet, ambling along backroads at twilight and champing her gums and spitting at people she passed. Funny thing, but aside from Betsy's story about meeting the little green woman, none of the Bells themselves claimed to have seen the witch. It's said, though, that one of the boys said that once he'd grabbed her hand and it'd felt soft as velvet and warm.

Andrew Jackson once met Old Kate. Seems he'd heard the wild tales from Robertson County, so he got together half a dozen young bloods from the barroom of the Nashville Inn and set out for the Bell farm. In the party was a man named Busby, a top-notch witch-killer, according to him. He told Andy he'd give the Bell Witch her proper come-uppance even if she turned out to be a devil straight from hell.

Well, at the very moment Jackson's carriage crossed the boundary of the Bell property, the wheels locked. The driver whip-tailed the horses and cursed them out. Jackson poked his head out of the window and raised Cain with the driver and horses. But nothing happened. The carriage wheels might just as well have been locked with padlocks.

About that time a voice caterwauled out of the air over the carriage. "You can go on now, General," it said. "I'll see you tonight."

Sure enough Old Kate was good as her word. That night at the Bells' her voice spoke up right in front of Busby. It cackled, "Here I am! Shoot me! Do something, old witch-killer! Try me!"

Busby jerked out his horse-pistol—he had it specially primed and loaded with a charmed silver bullet—and drew down in

the direction the voice came from and squeezed the trigger. The hammer clicked, and that was all. The pistol wouldn't go off.

Then Busby's nose, uncommonly long and tipped with a red rum-blossom, began to twist. It twisted till Busby was hopping and yelling to beat the band. He went tripping across the room just like somebody was leading him by the nose. The door flew open and there was a loud thump. Dust flew from the seat of Busby's breeches. He went sailing through the door and rolled down the steps. Soon as he hit the bottom, he jumped to his feet and ran like a turkey.

"There's some more frauds in your party, General," said Old Kate. "I'll show 'em all up in a little while." When she said that, the whole party, Jackson leading, jumped for the door and lit out for Nashville as hard as they could tear.

Afterwards, somebody asked Andy about the meeting and the old boy said, "By the Eternal, I'd rather fight the British again than have any dealings with that torment called the Bell Witch!"

One morning about a year after that, John Bell was found dead in his room. Sitting on a chair by the bedside was a bottle of poison. Nobody knew how it got there. The family, of course, was convinced it was the work of the witch. Truth to tell, after John Bell's funeral, Old Kate left the Bells, and the years passed and nobody heard any more of the hag.

A long time later—in 1839, they say—Betsy Bell and Josh Gardner went to a Bell family picnic where they were going to announce their engagement. All the Bells and their kin came, and just as Josh Gardner called for attention to make his announcement, a loud voice cut in. "Well, well," it said, "here we all are!"



Old Mrs. Bell threw up her hands and started crying, "Have mercy on my soul! It's Old Kate!"

"Who in thunder did you think it was?" the voice said. "I've come back to make sure that fly-up-the-creek Betsy don't marry that Josh Gardner. Don't you dast do it, Betsy! I'll make your two lives a Hell on earth if you do!"

Old Kate ranted on in her usual way for a while and ended up by saying, "I'm going now, but mark my words, I'll be back in a hundred years. I'll have a sight of bad news then

for the folks of Tennessee and for the whole blamed Nation!" Her voice kept fading and died away on the last word.

Before that day was out Betsy gave Josh his engagement ring. She wouldn't have any more to do with him. He begged and stormed, but Betsy couldn't be changed. In a day or so Josh left Robertson County for good. Went to Texas, they say.

After he'd gone, Professor Powell began courting the girl again. Seems he'd never quite given up hope. At first Betsy refused him point blank, but finally he won her consent to have him and they were married. Betsy lived to be a very old woman, never troubled by Old Kate again.

*James R. Aswell*



*I Been Told*





## De Ways of de Wimmens



MOST FOLKS SAY DE SIX DAY WAS SATDY, CAUSE on de *seventh* day didn't de Lawd rest an look his creation over? Now hit *may* been Satdy dat he done de *work* of makin man an woman, but from all de signs, he must *thought up* de first man an woman on ol unlucky *Friday*.

Satdy *aw* Friday, de Lawd *made* em. Den he made a nice garden an a fine house wid a cool dogtrot faw dem to set in when de sun git hot. "Adam an Eve," he say, "here hit is. Git yo stuff together an move in."

"Thank you kindly, Lawd," say Eve.

"Wait a minute, Lawd," say Adam. "How we gwine pay de rent? You ain't create no money yet, is you?"

De Lawd say, "Don't worry yo haid bout dat, Adam. Hit's a free gift faw you an de little woman."

So de man and woman move in an start to red up de house

to make hit comfortable to live in. And den de trouble begun.

"Adam," say de woman, "you git de stove put up while I hangs de curtains."

"Whyn't you put up de stove," say Adam, "an me hang de curtains? You's strong as me. De Lawd ain't make neither one of us stronger dan de other. Howcome you always shovin off de heavy stuff on me?"

"Cause dey's man's work and dey's woman's work, Adam," say Eve. "Hit don't look right faw me to do dat heavy stuff."

"Don't look right to who?" say Adam. "Who gwine see hit? You know dey ain't no neighbors yet."

Eve stomp de flo. She say, "Jes cause hit ain't no neighbors yet ain't no reason faw us actin trashy behind dey backs, is hit?"

"Ain't dat jes like a woman!" say Adam. Den he set down and fold his arms. "I ain't gwine put up no stove!" he say. "An dat *dat*, woman!"

Next thing he know ol Eve lollop him in de talk-box wid her fist an he fall over backward like a calf hit by lightnin. Den he scramble up an was all over her like a wildcat. Dey bang an scuffle round dere to \* de house look like a cyclone wind been playin in hit. Neither one could whup, cause de Lawd had laid de same equal strenth on dem both.

After while dey's both too wore out to scrap. Eve flop on de baid and start kickin her feets an bawlin. "Why you treat me so mean, Adam?" she holler. "Wouldn't treat a no-count ol hound like you does po me!"

Adam spit out a tooth an try to open de black eye she give him. He say, "If I had a hound dat bang into me like you does, I'd kill him."

But Eve start bawlin so loud, wid de tears jes sopping up de bedclose, dat Adam sneak out of de house. Feelin mighty mean an low, he set round awhile out behind de smokehouse studyin whut better he do. Den he go find de Lawd.

De Lawd say, "Well, Adam? Anything bout de house won't work? Hit's de first one I ever made an hit might have some faults."

Adam shake his head. "De house is prime, Lawd. De *house* couldn't be no better dan hit is."

"Whut den, Adam?" say de Lawd.

"To tell de truth," say Adam, "hit's dat Eve woman. Lawd, you made us wid de equal strenth an dat's de trouble. I can't git de best of her nohow at all."

De Lawd frown den. "Adam!" he say. "Is you tryin to criticize de Lawd? Course you's of de equal strenth. Dat de fair way to make a man an woman so dey both pull in de harness even."

Adam tremble an shake but he so upset an miserble he jes has to keep on. He say, "But Lawd, hit reely ain't equal tween de two of us."

Lawd say, "Be keerful dere, Adam! You is *desputin* de Lawd smack to de face!"

"Lawd," say Adam, "like you says, we *is* equal in de strenth. But dat woman done found nother way to fight. She start howlin an blubberin to hit make me feel like I's a lowdown scamp. I can't stand dat sound, Lawd. If hit go on like dat, I knows ol Eve gwine always git her way an make me do all de dirty jobs."

"Howcome she learn dat trick?" say de Lawd, lookin like he thinkin hard. "Ain't seed no little ol red man wid hawns an a pitchfawk hangin round de place, is you, Adam?"

"Naw, Lawd. Thought I heard Eve talkin wid somebody down in de apple orchard dis mawnin, but she say hit jes de wind blowin. Naw, I ain't seed no red man wid hawns. Who would dat be, anyhow, Lawd?"

"Never you mind, Adam," say de Lawd. "*Hummmmmmmmm!*"

"Well," say Adam, "dis woman trouble got me down. I sho be much oblige if you makes me stronger dan Eve. Den I can tell her to do a thing an slap her to she do. She do whut she told if she know she gwine git whupped."

"So be hit!" say de Lawd. "Look at yoself, Adam!"

Well Adam look at his arms. Where befo dey was smooth an round, now de muscle bump up like prize yams. Look like hit was two big cawn pones under de skin of his chest an dat chest hit was like a barrel. His belly hit was like a wash-board an his laigs was so awful big an downright lumpy dey scared him.

"Thank you kindly, good Lawd!" say Adam. "Watch de woman mind me now!" So dat Adam high-tail hit home an bust in de back do.

Eve settin down rockin in de rocker. Eve lookin mean. Didn't say a mumblin word when Adam come struttin in. Jes look at him, jes retch down in de woodbox faw a big stick of kindlin.

"Drap dat stick, woman!" say Adam.

"Say who?" say de woman. "Who dat talkin big round here?"

Wid dat, she jump on him an try to hammer his haid down wid de stick.

Adam jes laugh an grab de stick an heave hit out de window. Den he give her a lazy little slap dat sail her clean cross de room. "*Dat* who sayin hit, sugar!" he say.

"My feets must slip aw somethin," say Eve. "An you de one gwine pay faw hit out of yo hide, Adam!"

So de woman come up clawin an kickin an Adam pick her up an whop her down.

"Feets slip agin, didn't dey?" say Adam.

"Hit must be I couldn't see good where you is in dis dark room," say Eve. She riz up an feather into him agin.

So Adam he pick her up an thow her on de baid. Fo she know whut, he start laying hit on wid de flat of his hand cross de big end of ol Eve. Smack her wid one hand, hold her down wid tother.

Fo long Eve bust out bawlin. She say, "Please quit dat whackin me, Adam honey! Aw please, honey!"

"Is I de boss round here?" say Adam.

"Yas, honey," she say. "You is de haid man boss."

"Aw right," he tell her. "I is de boss. De Lawd done give me de mo power of us two. From now on out an *den* some, you mind me, woman! Whut I jes give you ain't nothin but a little hum. *Next* time I turn de whole song loose on you."

He give Eve a shove an say, "Fry me some catfish, woman."

"Yas, Adam honey," she say.

But ol Eve was mad enough to bust. She wait till Adam catchin little nap. Den she flounce down to de orchard where dey's a big ol apple tree wid a cave tween de roots. She look round till she sho ain't nobody see her, den she stick her haid in de cave an holler.

Now, hit *may* been de wind blowin an hit *may* been a bird, but hit sho sound like somebody in dat cave talkin wid Eve. Eve she sound like she *complainin* dat she got a crooked deal an den hit sound like she sayin, "Yas—Yas—Yas. You means on which wall? De east wall? Oh! Aw right."



Anyhow, Eve come back to de house all smilin to herself like she know somethin. She powerful sweet to Adam de rest of de day.

So next mawnin Eve go an find de Lawd.

Lawd say, "You agin, Eve? Whut can I do faw you?"

Eve smile an drap a pretty curtsy. "Could you do me a little ol favor, Lawd?" say Eve.

"Name hit, Eve," say de Lawd.

"See dem two little ol rusty keys hangin on dat nail on de east wall?" Eve say. "If you ain't usin em, I wish I had dem little ol keys."

"I declare!" say de Lawd. "I done fawgot dey's hangin dere. But, Eve, dey don't fit nothin. Found em in some junk an think maybe I find de locks dey fit some day. Dey been hangin on dat nail ten million years an I ain't found de locks yet. If you want em, take em. Ain't doin me no good."

So Eve take de two keys an thank de Lawd an trot on home. Dere was two dos dere widout no keys an Eve find dat de two rusty ones fit.

"Aaah!" she say. "Here's de locks de Lawd couldn't find. *Now*, Mister Adam, we *see* who de boss!" Den she lock de two dos an hide de keys.

Fo long Adam come in out of de garden. "Gimme some food, woman!" he say.

"Can't, Adam," say Eve. "De kitchen do's locked."

"I fix dat!" say Adam. So he try to bust de kitchen do down. But de Lawd built dat do an Adam can't even scratch hit.

Eve say, "Well, Adam honey, if you go out in de woods an cut some wood faw de fire, I maybe can git de kitchen do





open. Maybe I can put one dem cunjur tricks on hit. Now, run long, honey, an git de wood."

"Wood choppin is yo work," say Adam, "since I got de most strenth. But I do hit dis once an see can you open de do."

So he git de wood an when he come back, Eve has de do open. An from den on out Eve kept de key to de kitchen an made Adam haul in de wood.

Well, after supper Adam say, "Come on, honey, les you an me hit de froghair."

"Can't," say Eve. "De baidroom do is locked."

"Dadblame!" say Adam. "Reckon you can trick dat do too, Eve?"

"Might can," say Eve. "Honey, you jes git a piece of tin an patch dat little hole in de roof an while you's doin hit, maybe I can git de baidroom do open."

So Adam patched de roof an Eve she unlock de baidroom do. From den on she kept *dat* key an used hit to suit herself.

So dat de reason, de very reason, why de mens *thinks* dey is

de boss and de wimmens *knows* dey is boss, cause dey got dem two little ol keys to use in dat slippery sly wimmen's way. Yas, fawever mo an den some!

An if you don't know *dat* already, you ain't no married man.

*James R. Aswell*



## *Snake Country*

DIS USE TO BE SNAKE COUNTRY. I MEANS *REEL* snake country. Dis day an time dey kills a rattlesnake now an den back yander in de cedars aw maybe a black racer aw a highland water moccasin. But dem is jes de leavins, jes de drugs of whut hit use to be.

In my young days man couldn't hardly walk from de house to de barn widout he carry a big sharp cawnknife to chop snakes out de way. Man couldn't walk dem days like we does today noway. Had to keep jumpin *an* bouncin up and down like a grasshopper less he want his laigs all chaw up by de snakes. Hit wawn't nothin to see snakes jes hangin by de hundreds off tree limbs like wash on de line. Dese days folks gits sung to sleep by katydids an treefrawgs. My day hit was de snakes hiss in de yard an under de house an quiled up on de rooftree dat lull us down.

Hit was reel snake country den. Folks was use to hit.

Hard to keep cows dem days. Too many milksnakes round here. Dem milk snakes was sho bad, too. Dey's dark kind of black snakes wid a mouf like a funnel. Dey hang round de pasture lot jes waitin faw de cows' bags to fill up wid milk. Den right smack up de cow's left hind laig go de snake an grab hold an start suckin faw who laugh de longest. Wouldn't turn loose dat cow's tittes till dey look faw a fact like some ol dry rag.

I's heard niggers didn't know whut dey talkin about say a cow dat been suck by a milksnake always give bloody an pizen milk from den on. Shoo! Ain't so. Back in dem snaky times I found out de way hit reely is.

Dem days I's workin faw Mist Joe Biggerstaff. Mist Joe he had fawty cows an a red bull but de bull got drowned. Well, dem fawty cows was all good milkers but Mist Joe never got none of dat milk. De milksnakes got hit every drap. By an by Mist Joe got mad.

He say, "Dog my cats and dog em good, I's gwine git some of dat milk if I bust doin hit!"

So he git me an thirty-nine other niggers an say, "Each one of you boys git a big hickory stick an pick you a cow. Stick wid dat cow all day. Beat off dem milksnakes. Yes, whop dem ol snakes, boys! Faw I aims to drink ol sweetmilk to-night."

So hit was fawty niggers an fawty cows bound faw de pasture lot. Whoppin snakes every foot of de way! My soul, weavin round to we's dizzy. But we frail em wid de hickory sticks, we tromp em in de dust an we kept em off from de cows.

De sun was hot, mighty hot. Now, hotter de sun git, de

livelier de snake feel. But hotter de sun, de sleepier de nigger. Sun bear down, snakes jes hissin an cavortin, niggers whoppin slower an slower an noddin dey haid.

Fo long we's all so tired-haided an sleepy we can't stand hit no mo. One after de next one all dem thirty-nine niggers sort of drap his hickory stick and keel over on de ground. I's de last nigger up. Mist Joe trust me an I try to keep dem snakes off one cow anyway. But dat sun git hotter *an* hotter. My haid weigh mo *an* mo. So fo long sleepy got me, an dey was fawty niggers stretch out in de sun snorin away.

Towards shadder of day we wakes up. We looks round faw de cows. Dere dey stands chawin dey cud an lookin happy.

"Looky dem bags!" I say. "Jes little ol dried up nothins!"

"Whut will Mist Joe say?" say nother nigger.

I say, "He bust a fence rail over somebody's haid, dat whut he say."

I looks round. I sees dem hateful ol milksnakes, fawty big ones all swole up wid milk to de bigness of a fat man's laig, layin up sound asleep. I look at em an I can feel Mist Joe landin dat fence rail upside my haid.

Den de bright notion hit me. "Boys," I say, "you all grab up dem milksnakes. Thow one over de back of each of dem cows."

So dey done hit an we driv de cows home. De nigger gals was waitin at de barn to milk. "We can't git no milk out of *dem* shrunk things," dey say. "Mist Joe gwine lam somebody, sho!"

I say, "Shet yo fool haid an learn somethin!"

Well, I didn't do nothin but hang up dem fawty sleepy ol snakes by dey tails. Naw, I didn't do a thing but milk



dem snakes from de tail down to de haid. Ol milk jes come foamerin out an fill de buckets. Milk enough faw man an chile an fawty-leven gallons left over faw de hawgs an chickens.

So from den on we never fool wid milkin no cows. We jes milk de snakes.

We's pretty use to de little ol rattlers an copperhairs an moccasins round dere. Pitch em out of de yard wid fawks like dey pitches hay dese days. Chillun play wid em like dey plays wid puppies now. But dem stingin snakes, dey was kind of bad. Dey was right handsome to look at, all spottled green an yaller wid a red streak down dey backs. But dey was devils. Pizen at both end, in de bite an *in* de sting. De ol buck an she stingin snakes was tween fifteen an twenty-five foot long, an I *has* seen em bigger.

One year back yander dey was a regular siege of stingin snakes round Mist Joe Biggerstaff's. Dey stang an bit most everybody round dere. But de good Lawd never put nothin bad on dis earth dat he didn't put somethin else good dat would cure hit. So hit was wid dem ol stingin snakes. If you's stang by one of em, you go let a rattlesnake bite you an dat kill de sting pizen. If you's bit by tother end of a stingin snake, why de pizen of a copperhaid cure *dat*. Mist Joe kept two barrels in de house, one full of rattlers an tother full of copperhairs. When anybody go out dey tote two fruit jars round dey neck wid couple of copperhairs an rattlers in dem case de party got stang or bit by de stingin snakes. So nobody round dere got killt by dem rascals.

But dem snakes done nother thing dat was bad. Mist Joe he had a fine stand of walnut trees aimin to sell em faw money. You know dem stingin snakes was jes ruinin dat walnut

stand. Dey stang de trees an de leaves turn yaller an drap off an de wood rot.

"Ain't gwine stand faw dis no longer!" Mist Joe say. "Boy," he say to me, "you handle dem milksnakes pretty good. See whut you can do wid dese thorn-tail torments."

So I set down an study hit an fo long de notion come to me. I's a mighty fast young buck in dem days. I's so blame fast I's de onliest one on de place ain't never been bit by no stingin snake. Dey jes couldn't tech me. Some of em git so mad when dey miss me dat dey stang aw bit de first thing come handy.

Dat howcome I go out snake-huntin wid nothin but my fast running feets to hep me. So what did I do? I choosed me a mean lookin ol stingin snake. I jumps at him an flags my nose an yells, "Yah, yah, yah!" like dat, as hateful as I knows how.

Well, dat snake say, "Here where I gits me a nigger!" He quile hisself up an zip his fangiddy haid at me.

But where is me? Ain't dere no mo. I's flaggin my nose at tother end of dat ol snake an yellin, "Yah, yah, yah!"

Maybe I didn't tell how de stingin snake have eyes both on de haid an de sting end. Anyhow, he do. So de sting end see me dere an whup out at me. But den I's back at de haid end. Haid end strike—I's back at de tail end. Tail end go faw me—I's at de haid.

Fo long dat snake git so mad he jes git plumb crazy. Haid end see de tail end strikin an turn round an bite dat tail end. Tail end sting de haid end. Dey go at hit hot *an* heavy. Pretty soon de haid end git de tail end in his mouf. An dere go de old stingin snake rollin way like a wheel, de haid bitin de tail, tail stingin de haid, till dey both pizen dey selfs



to death. Heaps of folks see dat an claim hit a new kind of snake. Hoop snake, dey say. Shoo! Ain't so. Hit was only dem old stingin snakes I's driv crazy.

An dat de way I cleared most of dem stingin snakes way from Mist Joe's place.

Well, hit look like de snakes jes breeded up thicker an thicker every year round in dis country. Dey plagued most folks considerable. Mist Joe didn't have as much snake bother as de rest, cause he had me workin faw him. But de snakes got de best of *me* one time.

Dat was de year de graveyard snakes was sech a pest. Dey's big fat old white snakes dat lives in graves. Ain't got no bite aw nothin to kill a man, but you hates to have em round you count of where dey hangs out an de way dey smells like a six-day cawpse. So Mist Joe had me busy keepin em off de place an I didn't know how thick de moccasins was gittin down in de creek.

Naw, dem moccasins had done got clean out of hand fo I know hit. Dey got so thick down in de creek dat dey jes plumb choke hit up like a dam. Well, dat creek riz up an overflow hits banks an hit was a little flood.

Fo de Lawd, de water come up so fast in de bottom pasture dat hit catch Mist Joe Biggerstaff's red bull an drownd him fo he could git to de high ground. Mist Joe had a fine sorrel runnin hoss name Prince an de water most caught dat hoss, too. But Prince run like de devil beatin tan bark an got to a little hill fo hit too late. Water riz all round him an fo long he was standin up to his neck in hit.

Well, if I'd stop long enough to figger, I'd know de dangerous fix dat fine hoss was in. But I's too hard run jes den. Mist Joe's right after me. "Boy," he say, "git a dozen niggers

an a waggin an go down an clear dem moccasins out of de creek."

"Yassuh, Mist Joe," I say. "Come on, you niggers," I say. "We gwine haul many an many a load of snakes fo dis job git done."

So den we got de waggin an some hay fawks an go down in de bottoms an start pitchin moccasins an haulin em away. We go at hit so fast dat de water stop risin.

I looks over yander an see Prince standin to his neck in hit an I yells, "Hold on, you Prince! You may git pretty wet but you won't git drowned like dat red bull."

Ol Prince he toss his haid an whinny. He know he can depend on *me*.

I ought been whupped faw not knowin whut gwine happen to Prince. But I's too busy fawkin moccasins in de waggin. De notion didn't hit me till hit too late.

We's been fawkin de snakes out of de creek faw twenty-fo hours when one dem niggers yells, "Looky dat Prince!"

So I looks an hit most surprise me to death. Dere was ol Prince rarin up on his hind laigs an pawin de air. His eyes was rollin an de white foam cotton up his mouf.

"He gwine crazy!" say a nigger.

"Look at his tail!" say nother.

An den dat Prince dive right smack off de hill in de water. Man, he splash dat water! Lawd, he swum like a paddle steamboat, thowin up de water till hit look like a rainstorm. He pass us like a bullet in a hurry!

I jes git one look at po ol Prince's tail. Hit was pitiful. Any fool know dat if you puts a hosshair in water faw twenty-fo hours hit turn into a snake. An in dem twenty-fo hours dat po hoss been standin up to de neck in water, dat tail done turned

to a mess of hosshair snakes. A thousand aw mo hosshair snakes, whuppin an lashin, wid dey haid buried in de po hoss's rump, rootin an bitin faw all dey's worth.

Hit jes naturally driv po Prince crazy. He run his self plumb to death after he git to dry land. And dat de time de snakes got de best of me.

Faw a while back in dem days hit look like de snakes gwine git de best of everybody. Now, hit dis way when you crosses a snake's track—hit give you de hot miseries in yo back less you walks backwards over dat track. Dey was so *many* snake tracks dem days dat hit was mighty slow *an* crooked faw folks to git anywhere. Man starts out faw Smyrna. Every step he take he have to back-step. Fo dat man know hit, he done back his self back clean to Murfreesboro. Dat bad, cause de man didn't want no Murfreesboro nohow. An if he bound faw Murfreesboro, he land in Smyrna. So if a man *want* to go to Smyrna, he better haid faw Murfreesboro. Yes, hit was pretty slow *an* crooked dem days.

Hit ain't no tellin how hit come out if somethin hadn't happen. But somethin happen.

One day bright in de mawnin an early de snakes started leavin de country. Yes, snakes by de tens *an* thousands. Rattlers an copperhairs, moccasins an black racers, stinging snakes, milk-snakes, graveyard snakes, an all. Dey come pilin out of de hills an bottoms till hit look like dey gwine cover de earth. Dey hit de roads goin west, wigglin an workin three foot deep. Dey hissin was so loud hit could be heard faw miles. Dey stirred up a dust dat darken de sun an turn day into night mighty near. Aw Lawd, hit *was* a sight!

An by mawning hit wawn't a snake in dis country ceptin de lame, de halt, and de sickly. Dey was gone from here.

Faw long time dere, hit was a puzzle. I couldn't figger why all dem snakes left. Den I find out.

Seem like dey's *some* folks round here wawn't satisfied wid stickin to de hard down cold *facts* bout snakes like I do. Naw, dey begun makin up *lies* about de snakes.

So de snakes jes got mad an up an left de country, *dat's* whut!

James R. Aswell



## *Little Eight John*



ONCE AN LONG AGO DEY WAS A LITTLE BLACK boy name of Eight John. He was a nice lookin little boy but he didn't act like he look. He mean little boy an he wouldn't mind a word de grown folks told him. Naw, not a livin word. So if his lovin mammy told him not to do a thing, he go straight an do hit. Yes, spite of all de world.

"Don't step on no toad-frawgs," his lovin mammy told him, "aw you bring de bad lucks on yo family. Yes you will."

Little Eight John he say, "No'm, I won't step on no toad-frawgs. No ma'am!"

But jes as sho as anything, soon as he got out of sight of his lovin mammy, dat Little Eight John find him a toad-frawg an squirsh hit. Sometime he squirsh a heap of toad-frawgs.



An the cow wouldn't give no milk but bloody milk an de baby would have de bad ol colics.

But Little Eight John he jes duck his haid an laugh.

"Don't set in no chair backwards," his lovin mammy told Eight John. "It bring de weary troubles to yo family."

An so Little Eight John he set backwards in every chair.

Den his lovin mammy's cawn bread burn an de milk wouldn't churn.

Little ol Eight John jes laugh an laugh an laugh cause he know why hit was.

"Don't climb no trees on Sunday," his lovin mammy told him, "aw hit will be bad luck."

So dat Little Eight John, dat bad little boy, he sneak up trees on Sunday.

Den his pappy's taters wouldn't grow an de mule wouldn't go.

Little Eight John he know howcome.

"Don't count yo teeth," his lovin mammy she tell Little Eight John, "aw dey come a bad sickness in yo family."

But dat Little Eight John he go right ahaid an count his teeth. He count his uppers an he count his lowers. He count em on weekdays an Sundays.

Den his mammy she whoop an de baby git de croup. All on count of dat Little Eight John, dat badness of a little ol boy.

"Don't sleep wid yo haid at de foot of the baid aw yo family git de weary money blues," his lovin mammy told him.

So he do hit an do hit sho, dat cross-goin little ol Eight John boy.

An de family hit went broke wid no money in de poke.

Little Eight John he jes giggle.

"Don't have no Sunday moans, faw fear Ol Raw Haid Bloody Bones," his lovin mammy told him.

So he had de Sunday moans an he had de Sunday groans, an he moan an he groan an he moan.

An Ol Raw Haid Bloody Bones he come after dat little bad boy an change him to a little ol grease spot on de kitchen table an his lovin mammy wash hit off de next mawnin.

An dat was de end of Little Eight John.

An dat whut always happen to never-mindin little boys.

*James R. Aswell*







### *One Fine Funeral*

DE LAWD AIN'T GOIN LET *NOBODY* GIT AWAY wid no meanness. Sometime it look like he ain't payin no mind to what happen, he let some folkses git by so long. Den agin, don't nobody know a pusson is up to no devilment till de Lawd put de sign of his vengeance on dem. Yes, de Lawd move in a mysterious way, but he *do* move.

Like it was wid Addie Bell Henslee and her brother Cass, de time Cass want to git married. Cass come home dis Friday night and say to Addie Bell, "Addie Bell," he say, "I goin git married wid Josephine tomorrow week."

Addie Bell don't like dat *a-tall*.

"What de name of God you talkin bout, Cass?" she say, "What ail you, you simlin-brain, frizz-headed fool? You mean

dat lanky, haggry-lookin Josie Foxhall? You ain't got no business marryin dat dim yaller bat-face wench. She so snotty she won't speak to her own mammy. You ain't got no business marryin nobody. You got all de wimmens you wants right here on North Central Street. Far as dat go, you got dis Josie, too, so what for you want to marry her?"

"Josephine she think we ought to git married," Cass say. "It seem like de right thing to do. And please, Addie, don't call her Josie. You know how she like for folkses to call her her right name, Josephine."

Addie Bell say, "Oh she do, do she? Josephine, huh?" she say. "Well *I* got a lots better name for her dan *dat*. Jest you wait till I *sees* her! I sho will tell her a few mouffulls of sump'm. Dat shriveled-out, shrunk-up, pale-faded hussy! She look like a frostbit pole bean. I swear I believe you done plumb lost yo mind, Cass."

So dey talk and dey argue. Dey go on like dis for a long spell. And Addie Bell she ask how come Cass ain't please to stay wid her like he always done.

"Ain't I always take good care of you and provide for you good?" she say. "Is you ever have to turn a lick of work, you black-weazled, monkey-face baboon? You de laziest nigger in town. And ain't I always keep up insurance on you to bury you good? Ain't never a week I fails to pay yo quarter benefits long wid mine. And now when you is gittin so old you most dead anyway, you wants to go and git *married*! Old age done smite you in de head, Cass. You done gone and got soft in de head."

Cass say, "Dat jest what I want to tell you bout, Addie. About de insurance, I mean. A man's *wife* is due and bound to git his insurance, Addie. *Everbody* know *dat*. I done tell



Josephine I knowed you won't mind, to make her de beneficiary, Addie."

"You *what?*" Addie Bell say. "You tell her you knowed I won't *mind?* I see you toastin on a pitchfawk in hell befo I sees dat dough-face slut collect any insurance dat *I* paid de benefits on."

Cass don't git much sleep dat night. Addie Bell take on sump'm awful. Ever once in a while she let up and Cass figure she bout wo out now. He say to hisself, she bound to quit now. Den she start in agin twice as strong.

Cass turn over on de bed and stuff de bedclothes in his years, but he can't shut out Addie Bell. It go on dis way all night long and Cass can't stand it much longer. Soon as gray begin to crack in de sky he git up and leave de house.

Cass sneak in pretty late dat night and de next few days he lay low. But Addie Bell ain't say no mo bout Cass gittin married. So long Monday or Tuesday Cass git up his nerve and mention de insurance agin.

He say, "Josephine and me aimin to git married dis comin Saturday, Addie. I sho do hope you's decided to fix up dat insurance all right?"

Addie Bell say yes, she done study and *decide* Cass is right. She say she make de insurance over soon as Cass and Josie git married.

So de insurance man come round dat Wednesday to collect de benefit. And Addie Bell *double* Cass's insurance. So now it cost fifty cents a week where it *is* only cost twenty-five. But Addie Bell know dat de last time she have to pay de benefits.

Friday night Addie Bell fix Cass a sho nough fine supper. She say, "Cass, dis is de last time I git to cook for you, so I wants you to enjoy and remember it. I done fix everthing I knows you likes best. Dey's de likeliest mess of turnip greens you ever see, cook wid a whole hog jowl and plenty of poke salad mix in. And cawn pone and buttermilk to go long. And day's oodles of fried chicken, cook all crunchy and brown like you likes it. And a big pot of black-eyed peas wid de hot pepper chow-chow you likes. I do hope you likes it, Cass."

Cass like it, all right. Dat Cass was *one* man relish eatin. He eat like a old black betsy sow wid ten new pigs. He clean de table off.

Addie Bell ain't eat none herself. She jest stand by and wait

on Cass. "Have some mo poke salad, Cass," she say. "Let me po you some mo buttermilk. And dey's a sweet tater pie for *desert*. I wants you to eat hearty, Cass."

Cass eat hearty, all right. He shovel it in like de nigger fire-mens stokin de Robert E. Lee.

Bout a half hour after supper Cass sit on de front stoop smoking his old cawn-cob. All to once he grab his belly and bend up plumb double. He fall outen de chair and commence to holler till all de niggers on North Central Street heard him and come a-runnin. "Oh, Addie, honey, I'se a-dying! Oh, Addie, call de doctor quick!"

"Hush yo mouf, you fool no-good nigger!" Addie Bell say. "Ain't nothin de matter wid you cept you done made a hog of yo-self. You plain done eat too much. You ain't need a doctor no mo dan I does."

But Cass he done dead by time de last niggers git dere from de far end of North Central Street. So dey lay Cass out on de bed and put some money pieces on his eyelids. Dey turn de mirror and pictures to de wall. Some of dem start to moan.

"Po Cass!" dey say. "Po Cass, you gone and left us. Done gone and left po Addie. Done gone and left po Josie. Po Cass, po Cass, done gone to meet Sweet Jesus!"

Some of dem whispers and say, "Po Cass sho do die hard. Dat look bad for Addie. Cass come back and hant her, sho."

But Addie Bell ain't seem much *upset*. When she see Cass done plumb dead she call de insurance doctor. So de doctor come and look at Cass and he say Cass is dead.

So he ask Addie some questions bout Cass and how old he is and how he die. And he fill out de papers to say Cass die wid de cute indigestion, which mean wid a godawful bellyache.

When de doctor leave, Addie Bell call de undertaker and dey

lay Cass out for buryin. Dey wrap Cass up in windin sheets and lay him out on de coolin-board. Addie Bell tell de undertaker to do de funeral up in high style, cause she git twice as much insurance as usual. She say she want Cass to have de biggest and best funeral North Central Street ever see.

Den Addie Bell call some regular moaners to come in and help dem moan. And now Addie Bell got de business all done, so she start in to moan herself. She carry on mo dan anybody.

Some of dem say dis look funny. "How come?" dey say, to one nother. "Addie Bell ain't much *put-out* till now. She ain't seem much broke up at first, and now she moan louder dan anybody."

"Dat ain't all look funny," say some others. "How come Cass die on *dis* Friday? Jest when he bout to git married tomorrow? And Addie Bell don't seem no bit surprised when he die. Dey's sump'm someways peculiar."

So dey talk to one nother, but Addie Bell ain't take no notice. And when Josie Foxhall come in, Addie kiss her and call her, "Po honey." And each cry down de other one's neck.

De niggers come in from near and far to set up wid de corpse and help moan. Dey bring plenty white cawn to keep wakeful and dey moan for three nights and two days.

On de third day dey hold Cass's funeral. Niggers come from all over and de church house was plumb packed full. When you stand off a piece and look at it, de walls looks like dey bulge out. Dey was old niggers, young niggers, rich niggers, po niggers, near niggers, far niggers, and a lot dat jest plain niggers. And some of dem sad and some of dem glad, but all of dem pretty well drunk. Dey's mo niggers and autos on hand dan North Central Street ever see. Dat sho is a fine funeral.

Out in de church yard de grave is dug, six foot deep and six

long. And a awning spread overhead to keep it dry if it rain. And a striped canopy awning from de church door out to de street. But ain't no cloud in de sky, and de June sun shine like a wash-day fire. Sho is a fine day for de funeral.

Inside de church house dey so many niggers don't look like dey's room for de corpse. But Cass lying dere right up front in a satin-line coffin wid gold handles. And de fernses and flowers stack waist deep all round. Dat sho is a mighty fine funeral.

So de preacher git up and dey sing some hymns and dey sho do sing dem sweet. De window panes rattle and de shingles shake and de whole church house creak and groan.

Den de preacher commence to pray and he pray for mo dan a hour. Dis preacher name Brother Bumpas and he sho can pray and preach. Den dey all sing another hymn, and de preacher commence to preach. And he preach all about Heaven.

"Brethern *and* sisters," he say, "we ought *all* of us think about Heaven, but *most* of de time we don't. But when de Lawd call one among us, den we *should* stop and study about it.

"And now dat Cass is *in* Heaven, we wonder what do he *find* dere? I tell *you* brethern and sisters, he find it a wondrous place.

"When Cass enter dem pearly gates, amazement done seize upon him. He find it a land someways like de earth, only a lot mo prettier. Like de *prettiest* place on dis earth, only a *lot* mo prettier.

"Now consider dese flowers and fernses," he say, "dat stack all about Cass's coffin. Do Cass find flowers like *dese* in Heaven? Well, he do *and* he don't. Fine as dese flowers here is, dey don't hold a nubbin to dem dat's in Heaven. Dey is fernses and flowers *and* shrubses dat's bigger *and* greener dan any on dis earth. Cass he see roses and flowers, flowers *and* roses. He see red roses, *pink* roses, yaller roses, *white* roses, he even see green and

blue roses. He see roses dat's spotted *all* colors, like de fantail peacock's feathers.

"He see birds and beastes about him of ever sorts and conditions. He see lambs *and* dogs, and hawkses *and* doves, and love birds *and* lions all about him. And dey is *all* friends wid one nother and friends wid de peoples likewise. De fleas and de skeeters *don't* bite and dey ain't *no* bedbugs *a-tall*. Everthing in Heaven is *jest* like Cass like it, only a whole lot mo so."

Brother Bumpas say Cass get his *reward* for de good life he lead on dis earth. He tell what a fine place Heaven is and what a good time Cass have dere.

He say, "Cass ain't got no troubles of *no* kind, now dat he is in Heaven. Dey ain't no *wars* in Heaven and dey *ain't* no sweet-heart troubles. Dey ain't no work to do and dey ain't no bills to pay. And dey ain't no taxes *neither*, and likewise no stinky smells.

"All times de weather jest right, so don't *nobody* talk none *about* it. It don't rain, *nor* thunder, nor lightin, *nor* snow, but dey's always plenty of water.

"Don't nobody notice de time, cause in Heaven time jest stand still. Say Cass take his self a catnap. Maybe so he sleep ten million *years* but it jest like he *doze* for ten minutes. He wake up wid his friends close about him. Den might be he eat him some breakfast. A few pork chops, maybe, or maybe fried chicken, wid coffee and *preserves* and hot biscuits. Or *anything* else he might like. All dis he get and lots mo, cause he live for de Lawd on dis earth."

Brother Bumpas say Cass always is been a mighty man at de prayin.

"In Heaven," he say, "dey's no prayin. De Lawd don't never pray, cause He got nobody to pray to. We don't pray no mo



neither, cause dey *ain't* no sin no longer. And we don't have to go to no church.

"But while we is *on* dis earth it behoove us to meet and pray mightily. Dat way we can *all* get to Heaven. Oh brethern, oh sisters, I *tell* you, dat Heaven's *a sweet* place to be!

"Cass will be dere to greet us and *all* dem dat's gone befo him. And de Lawd and de angels will sing and *all* of us join in de singin."

So Brother Bumpas preach, and he preach for mo dan three hours. It sho was a mighty fine preachin.

And now de preachin is done and dey most ready to put Cass away. Dey stand up to sing de last hymn, and Addie Bell go up to lead. She stand dere right beside Cass. She close to de pulpit, right under de organ loft. She commence to sing "Steal Away."

Addie Bell singin sweet, sho nough. She mo dan a little bit tight, holding to de coffin wid one hand and swayin like a sycamore saplin. De organ is bumblin and grumblin and Addie Bell singin *so* sweet. De others all singin too, and stompin dey feets, slow-like. De whole church house creakin and groanin.

And den all to once it give way. De church-house flo spread apart and de rafters crack and bust loose. De walls commence to swag in and de roof shingles crackin apart. De whole organ loft sway out from de wall.

Den de organ bust loose and fall. It *jest* miss de coffin, it *jest* miss de pulpit. Right *smack* on Addie it fall and squash her totally flat.

And dat lick finish de house. On through de flo go de organ. Organ, pulpit, coffin and all, on down to de ground dirt, eight foot below. De whole flo bust plumb loose and everbody fall eight foot to de ground. And de rafters cave in about dem.

De coffin hit de ground wid a smack. It bust open and fling

Cass out. Dere he sit wid his eyes wide open, prop up agin one of de high stilt postes dat's suppose to hold de flo up. He starin right *at* Addie Bell. And one of his arms fling straight out in front of him, pointin right at her. Addie Bell deader dan Cass is now, squash totally flat by de organ. And nobody else ain't hurt.

So after dat, folkses all know. Dey all know Addie Bell poison Cass so he can't marry Josephine Foxhall. Addie Bell done poison Cass and de Lawd strike her dead for her meanness.

But dat sho was one fine funeral. De niggers on North Central Street ain't never forgit it till yet.

*E. E. Miller*



## Double Trouble



"TWO IS MY LUCKY NUMBER," SAY TUBAL Creasy, "and is been ever since I was bawn twinses. And don't my own name start off wid *two*?"

"Rest of you niggers all time talkin bout three. Huh! Three ain't in it wid two! Two is de natural number for things to go good, but three forever cause trouble.

"Like two folkses, a man and a woman. First off dey git along fine. Den along come another man or another woman and dat make *three*. And den do trouble commence! Man, oh man! Take three folkses and you got mo trouble dan a hound dog got fleas."

When Tubal and his twin brother Jubal was two little bitty tar-babies, dey folks start dem off to school. And first off Jubal show how smart he is. He say, "Teacher, I can count."

"Let's hear you," de teacher say.

So Jubal hold up his left hand and mark off de fingers, and say, "One, two, three, fo, five!"

"My!" say de teacher, "dat's fine! Tubal, can you count too?"

"Sho I can count," say Tubal. "One, two."

De teacher say, "No, no, Tubal. Don't stop so soon. Count de fingers on yo left hand."

So Tubal say, "One, two, one, two, one."

"You know dat ain't right, Tubal," de teacher say, "you suppose to say, 'One, two, three, fo, five!' like yo brother Jubal done. You must git him to larn you."

"No'm," say Tubal, "dem other numbers don't interest me none. Two is de only number dat's any good. Cose you got to have *one* to git to *two*, but de others ain't no use a-tall."

And de teacher can't larn him no different.

Tubal and his twin brother Jubal sometimes sleep in de same bed together. And Tubal find out de two of dem together can raise spirits and ghostes. And dat widout even tryin.

Tubal be about to drop off to sleep and he rouse up and say, "Jubal, I wish you stop shovin me. Else I goin bust you in de snout!"

"Why, I ain't shove you a-tall," Jubal say, "but you sho better quit kickin me in de ribs!"

And Tubal say, "What you mean? I ain't kick you nary time. And dere you go *pushin* me!"

Sometimes dis go on all night long. Dat spirit play jack wid dem both.

Tubal say, "Dat jest go to show you. *Two* is de number wid power. Dey's a *sight* of power in two! When we sleeps apart dis ain't never happen."

Not long after dis Jubal die, and folkses tell Tubal how sorry dey is. "Yes," say Tubal, "dat's bad. But den agin it prove how lucky I is, and how two is my lucky number. If I ain't been bawn twinse I be dead myself, but now de one dat *ain't* me is dead. Now ain't dat luck for a fack?"

When Tubal is a young buck nigger, he take to gamblin heavy. He carry a two dollar bill for luck, and he spend all his time shootin craps. But he ain't throw nothin but snake eyes. He lose all he got, from his shoes to his hat-band feather, but he keep his two dollar bill.

"Well, honey kiss me wid a skillet!" he say at last. "I ought to know better dan dat. Two is my lucky number, so I can't help but throw it, but two ain't so lucky for craps. It plain to *see*, *dis* ain't my game."

So Tubal ain't shoot no mo craps. He start in to playin de numbers. Always he pick a number wid two in it somewheres. But first off he ain't have no luck. Say he play 289. Two-eighty-nine ain't show up a-tall, but two days later nine-twenty-eight fall out. By dat time Tubal is bettin on six-forty-two. Six-forty-two is lost in de woods, but two days later two-sixty-four turn up.

Tubal, he losin his money. He fold and unfold his two dollar bill. He tell a old grizzle gray-head nigger bout it. "I can't figger it out," Tubal tell him.

De gray-head study a spell and say, "Dat's easy. You ought to box de number. Den if you pick nine-fifty-two, say, and five-twenty-nine or two-ninety-five or any number like dat made of dem three figgers turn up, you win anyhow. And since dese numbers falls out two days later you want to play dem dat way. Box all de numbers and play dem for two days after you picks dem and you goin win you some money."

"Well, rock me to sleep wid a sledge-hammer!" say Tubal. "Look like I ought to knowed dat! Natchelly dey would hit two days later, cause two is my lucky number. And I sho will box dem numbers."

"And sump'm else dat might help," say de gray-head, "is to

go by yo dreams to pick numbers. Dat's de way I does and dey don't fail to turn up. Might be it's sooner or might be it's later, but when I dream dem, dey fall out one time or another."

Tubal say dat sound like a right good notion. "Only one thing," he say, "Dey must be a two in de number. But iffen it's one of *my* dreams dey's bound to be a two in it."

So dat night Tubal has a dream. He dream he stand by de crossroads where two roads cross, and here come two autos down one road. Dey pass Tubal and he see de license number on both cars is *two*. Den here come two more cars down de other road and dey numbers is both twenty-two. Den two more come down de first road and dey numbers is two-twenty-two. Den two come down de other road wid four *two's* apiece on de license plates. And de cars go on and on wid bigger and bigger license plates and all de numbers on dem is long rows of *two's*. Den Tubal look up at de sky and it's night and de stars is shinin. And all of de stars is little figger *two's* and dey shine like a million diamonds. And den de dream fade away and Tubal wake up and it's mawnin.

All dat day up to way past noon Tubal try to figger what do de dream mean. He read dream books and he talk wid old niggers but don't none of dem agree. And de time gittin long near two o'clock when de pick-up boy come round to git de tickets. Tubal commencin to sweat like he at a August election.

Bout two minutes befo two, Tubal look up at de clock. And what de dream mean come to him so quick, he set down right hard in de flo.

"Well, dust off my pants wid a black snake whup!" say Tubal, gittin up on his feet. "Dat dream mean jest what it say. I wants to bet on as many *two's* as I can. And dat mean two-twenty-two."



So Tubal fix out his ticket for two-twenty-two, and he box de number all round. De pick-up boy tell him dat's a fine notion and ask how much Tubal want to play. Tubal he say he want to play twenty-two cents straight. So de pick-up boy figger out dat's a dollar and thirty cents to box it all round. And Tubal play dat number for de next two days.

And sho nough two days after dat two-twenty-two fall out. Tubal can't wait for de pick-up boy to come round and pay him off. He figger he be rich now, cause he git mo dan a hundred dollars.

But when de pick-up boy come round he shake his head and say, "I mighty sorry, Tubal. I sho is mighty sorry. But when we check up yo ticket we find it short two cents. It add up a dollar-thirty-two and you only pay a dollar-thirty. And you know de rule we has. We can't pay off on no short tickets. I sho mighty sorry, Tubal."

So Tubal still can't win. Dat lucky *two* trip him agin.

"I reckon I jest on de wrong side," say Tubal. "I still on de losin side. Den de thing to do is git on de winnin side."

So Tubal git him a job bein pick-up boy and he git him a car to drive. A fine second-hand Ford coach. He say to his self, "Now I's fix. I sho can't lose *dis* way."

Now a new mayor is jest take office and he startin to clean up de town. He bear down on de numbers heavy. So de big boss say to his pick-up boys, "Be keerful. Don't take no chances gittin caught, cause I can't do you no good for maybe de next two weeks. After dat things be all right agin."

So de pick-up boys lay low and dey keerful who see dem wid tickets.

Two days later Tubal pull up his car at Cedar Street and Twenty-second. He lookin for a place to park. De onliest place he find open is right by a fire plug. He pull in and stop.

Jest as he climbin out of de car, a *police* buggy-whup car pull up cross de street wid two *policemans* in it. One of dem jump out and run cross de street, wavin his club and yellin at Tubal, "Hey, you! Wait a minute! I wants to *see* you!"

Tubal lose his fine new segar butt. He back up and stand befo de fire plug.

De *policeman* git up close and say, "Say! What number fall out today?"

Tubal sho is relieve. "Two-sixty-eight," he say.

De *police* sling his club to de ground. "Damn!" he say. "And I had six-eighty-two and ain't box it! If dat don't beat de Jews!" He glare at Tubal fierce.

Den he notice Tubal standin in front of de fire plug. "So!" he say. "Parked by a fire plug, huh? And a pick-up boy for de numbers, too! Engaged in de gamblin racket! Taking all de po folkses money! I spect we better run you in."





So dey take Tubal down to de jailhouse and search him and dey find a whole passel of tickets. And de newspapers play de case up big and say de *police* really cleanin de town up.

So when Tubal come to trial two months later dey got a long charge wid twenty-two *indites* agin him. And de judge say he goin make a example of dis desperate character, and he give Tubal twenty years in de state pen at hard labor.

Tubal seem some *put-out* at dis. "Please suh, Cap'n Jedge," he say, "can't you change dat sentence somehow? Cose two is my lucky number, but I notice it ain't so good long wid other numbers and naughtses."

De jedge say, "No, Tubal, I's fraid I can't change it. We got to clean up dis town and I can't reduce it none."

"Nosuh, I ain't mean dat, suh, Cap'n Jedge," say Tubal, "but

could you jest make dat twenty-two years, cause two is my lucky number?"

"All right, Tubal," say de jedge, "de sentence is twenty-two years. And I hopes you finds it lucky."

"Thank you kindly, suh, Cap'n Jedge," say Tubal, and he grin from year to year, "I *sho* do preciate dat. I done bet de key-toter my two dollar bill dat my sentence be twenty-two years. If I was to lose my two dollar bill," say Tubal, "I never *would* have no mo luck!"

*E. E. Miller*



### *Luster an de Devil*

I AIN'T BEEN DERE BUT I BEEN TOLD BOUT DEM mean folkses down yander in de swampy lands.

Meanest swamper ever live was man name Luster. He so ugly an black dat at de high noontime hit look like midnight faw half a mile around him. An *mean!* Laws! Luster he *so* mean dat nothin but pizen toadstools would grow in his footsteps.

Well, hit was jes one thing in de world dat trouble Luster. Dem swampers see him roamin round lookin grum wid his lip hangin down a foot.

"Whut ail you, Luster?" dey say.

"My feets," say Luster. "I can whup any man dat come up, but I can't git my feets warm. I wears sheep wool socks, summer

an winter, but my big old feets is always cold as blue spring-mud."

"Whyn't you warm em at de fire?" dey say.

"Aw, hit ain't no use," say Luster. "I try dat. My feets is so cold dat dey puts out de fire if I shoves em close enough to do some good. Jes freeze up dat fire to hit's nothin but a nest of red ice."

"Hit's de damp do hit," dey say. "Hit's dis here ol wet swamp, Luster. Whyn't you dreene de swamp? You's big an strong. If anybody can dreene de swamp, hit's Ol Luster."

"Doggone!" say Luster. "Gimme a pick an gimme a shovel, folkses. Yeah!" say Luster. "I gwine dreene dis ol swamp!"

So Luster got de pick an shovel. He spit on his hands and swung de pick—*unh—unh—unh!* Every time he *unh*, de pick loosen ten foot of dirt. So he digged faw a week dere. Every time he thow out a shovel of dirt, hit look like dynamite goin off.

One day Luster taken off to eat him little somethin. He fixin to take a bite when a black man, blacker dan Luster, pop out of de hole an come scootin up de slope like a rabbit. He was kind of smokin an he smell like a hot iron.

De black man look mad. Sparks was jes spittin from his ears an some little red flames was curlin out of his nose. "Whut de devil you think you is doin, Luster?" he say.

"Who want to know?" say Luster, reaching faw his shovel.

"De Devil, dat who!"

"Hunh," say Luster. "You is split from de ground to de belly-band, ain't you?"

"Yeah, Luster, but I ain't a man. It's de Devil straight from Hell. An Hell's back yard is whut you's jes befo bustin into. I was layin out dere takin a nap when a clod of dirt hit me smack



on de nose. I look up and see de pick point stickin through de roof. Luster, I ain't gwine put up wid you makin de roof of Hell leaky! Wid dat low grade coal we has to use hit's hard enough keepin de fires goin widout lettin no water in!"

"Aw, shet yo tater-trap, black man! You ain't no Devil!"

"Now, Luster, look at me good. Don't I look like de Devil to you?"

"Naw, black man! I knows a preacher man look mo like de Devil dan you."

"Come on now, Luster!" say de black man, gittin so upset dat he begun sweatin little streams of runnin fire. "You got to admit I got a tail. Take a look, Luster."

"Hunh," say Luster. "I knows a man born wid a tail an two extry fingers an toes. But he ain't no Devil. He jes a Methodist."

Black man stomp his foot an fire spout up.

"But I *is* de simon pure true blue Devil, Luster! Cross my heart!"

Luster jes laugh. "Prove hit. Yeah, *prove* you *is* de Devil!"

"Now you *is* talkin sense," say de black man. "How you want me to prove hit?"

Dat jes whut ol smart Luster waitin to hear. He say, "Well, my feets *is* sort of cold an if you's de Devil sho enough, why, supposin you jes give em little whiff of de fire of Hell to warm em up."

So de Devil run back to Hell and dip up a gourd full out of de hottest core an come back to where Luster was settin. So Luster taken off his shoes an his sheep wool socks an stuck out his big ol feets.

"You sho got a pair of feets, Luster," say de Devil. "My land!" he say. "Look at dat frost on em!"

"Yeah," say Luster, "de minute dey hits de air, hit's frost all over em. Hurry wid dat hellfire, black man!"

So de Devil po some of de gourd of fire on Luster's feets.

"Aaah!" say Luster. "Dat feel good. Dey's gittin warmish. Po some mo, Brother Devil."

So de Devil jes splash de whole gourd of fire on Luster's feets. "Didn't I tell you I's de Devil, Luster?" he say.

"Sho did. My, dat feel fine!"

Den Luster yell, "*Ouch!* You black son-of-gun, you blister my ankle!" An den he jump up and lam de Devil over de haid wid his shovel an de Devil drap daid in his tracks.

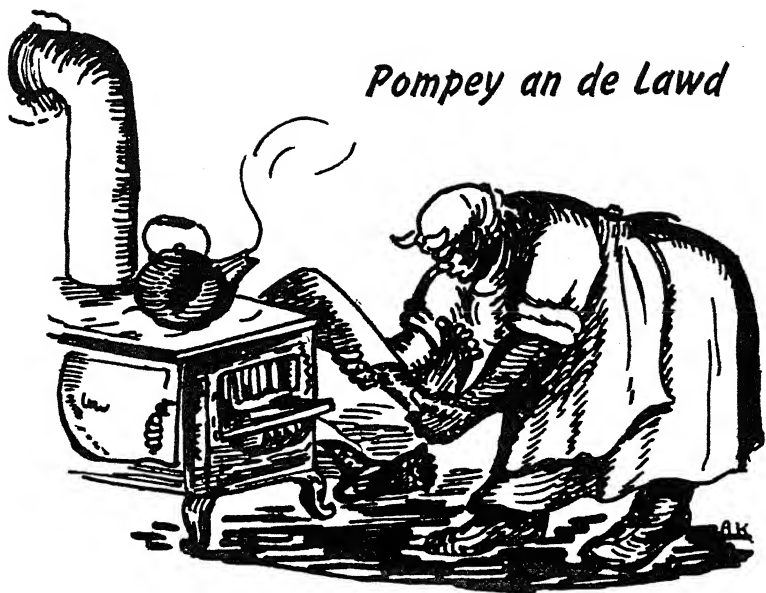
So Luster thowed de Devil back in de hole and went on off wid his warm feets. "Dese is reel feets now!" say Luster. An so when hit come de next rain de hole fill up wid water.

An ever since den, folkse call hit de Reelfeets Lake. An if you don't believe dat, you can go dere any day in de year and see dat lake!

*James R. Aswell*



## Pompey an de Lawd



I AIN'T BEEN DERE BUT I BEEN TOLD BOUT HOW hit was in de slavery days.

Mister Bird owned him a nigger name Pompey an Pompey want to be free. "Ain't no free, Pomp," dey say, "less you dies and goes to heaven."

"Well," say Pompey, "I'll jes go and jump in de river an sink like a rock."

"Naw, Pomp," dey say, "dat ain't no free, neither. Aw, naw! Hit's a *sin*, Pomp, an you's gwine to hot hell if you does dat. Ol Devil spread you out on de fiery coals an turn de blower on. Den you's damned in hell, Pompey, faw ever *an* a day."

"I'll run away," say Pompey.

"Aw, naw, Pomp," dey say. "Don't you do hit. Paddroller git you faw sho. Dey bring you back an whup you to yo hide won't hold shucks. Naw, Pompey, don't you do hit, boy."



So every night Pompey pray to de Lawd. "Oh Lawd," pray Pompey, "I wants to be free an dey ain't no free but sweet heaven."

But po Pompey never git no action. Pray *an* pray an dere he still is, still Pompey livin an workin in de slavery days.

So he git down on his knees an pray harder *an* louder faw de Lawd to fetch him away from de slavery days. Dat de way Pompey run on every night of de world, but he never git no satisfaction.

Well, one night Pompey was prayin away. Mister Bird come wanderin down to de slave quarters, jes walkin in de night air an worryin bout somethin. So whut do he hear but a lot of loud blimblam from Pompey's cabin. Mister Bird thought somebody's dyin, sho. He run to de cabin but he stop outside cause he can hear hit was only Pompey beggin de Lawd to take him away.

"Hunh," say Mister Bird. "Well now!" Den he kind of laugh an say, "I see where I has myself a little fun."

He sneak up to de window an pull his big black hat down over his haid an peep in.

Pompey's ol woman seed him an say, "Whut dat?"

All de chillun quit playin an say, "Whut dat, Pappy?"

Pompey quit prayin an look round. "Who dat at my window?"

Mister Bird he stick his haid in de empty rain barrel an yell, "Pompey, hit's me, hit's de Lawd. You ready to go to yo long home in sweet heaven, Pomp?"

He ask agin, "I say you ready, Pomp?"

Reason Pompey ain't answer was he was behind de stove wid his haid shove into de wood bin. He psst to his wife, he say, "Tell de Lawd I's gone possum huntin."



"Lawd," say de ol woman, "Pomp ain't here. He gone possum huntin."

"Do tell," say de Lawd.

"Come back nother time," say de ol woman.

"Naw, ol woman, can't do dat. Hit costes heap of money to make dis trip. Can't afford to come down here an not bring nobody back wid me. Got to take *somebody*. Reckon I'll jes take you, ol woman. Come on."

Ol woman jump out of her chair an howl, "Lawd, I's made a *mistake*. Pompey he's right here, Lawd. Come out from behind dat stove, you nappy-haired scoundrel, you!"

"Yas, Pompey," say de Lawd, "come on out! De heavenly choir waitin faw you to jine em. Dey needs a good tune-caller, an I hear you's as good as dey comes wid de fa-so-la."

"Lawd," say Pompey from behind de stove, "wait to I gits de spring plowin done."

"Naw, Pomp, can't do hit. You been beggin me to come git you, so come on now. Hit's gittin late."

"Lawd," say Pompey, "Mister Bird spect me to boss de other niggers when hit's time to top de cotton. I's de onliest one know how to do hit right."

"Roust out from behind dat stove, Pompey!" yell de Lawd. "I can't stand out here in dis here night air arguin wid you. You *hear* me!"

Ol woman say, "Pomp, do like he say fo he git mad an maybe hurt de chillun tryin to git at you!" So she take Pomp by de hind laig an pull him out.

"Lawd," say Pompey, "ol woman here she's de best alto we got at de Praise House. Take *her*, Lawd. I spect she help out de heavenly choir mo dan me. Anyhow, Mister Bird ain't gwine like hit if you takes me, de best field hand on de place."

"*You Pompey!*" was all de Lawd say. But from de way he say hit, Pomp know hit mean business.

"All right, Lawd, I's comin," he say. "Jes give me time to put on my Sunday pants."

"Suits me," say de Lawd. "Might as well look good till dey can git you fit out wid dem snow white robes."

So Pompey got back to de far end of de room. "Ol woman," he say, "hold dat do open."

Well, ol woman she open de do an Pompey rared back an—zip! He went through de do. I *mean* he *went* through de do!

"Whoa, dere, Pomp!" say de Lawd, an taken out after him.

By time old woman an de chillun crept to de do, dey hear Pomp hit de canebrake, a good mile away, wid a sound like fire-crackers.

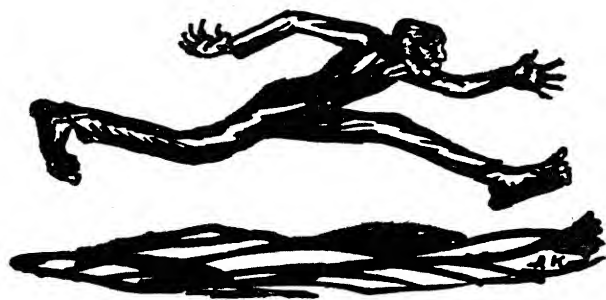
"Mammy," say de chillun, "de Lawd gwine catch Pappy, ain't he?"

Ol woman say, "Ain't *nobody* can catch yo pappy."

"Howcome?" dey say.

She say, "Didn't you fool chillun see dat Pappy was *bare-footed?*"

James R. Aswell





## *Melungeon Tales*





### *Old Horny's Own*

PEOPLE WAS JUST NATURALLY MEANER AND tougher in the olden days. There's still some pretty bad out-laws operating today, but they don't none of them compare to men like the Harpe Brothers and old Mason or John A. Murrell, the nigger-stealer. But when it comes down to *pure* devils, why them old rascals ain't a patching to the Melungeon tribe that used to rove these mountains a-killing and a-burning and a-carrying on terrible. It's been a long time ago, but to this selfsame day womenfolks back through here curb down their young'uns by saying, "If you don't act purty, the Melungeons will git you!"

Now Melungeon don't mean what church they are, like Baptist, Holiness, or Campbellite. It's a name for a separate generation of mankind in these mountains. It's the name for them dark little people that hide their cabins yonder and away back on the ridges where the briars and underwood grow so hindersome that the thick-hidedest old razorback will set down and study hard before he'll take a venture through it.

There's two tales on how the Melungeons come to be in the mountains. The old grannies say one time Old Horny got mad



at his old shrew-wife and left Hell and wandered all over the earth till he reached Tennessee. He set on a high bald and looked around him.

"I declare to Creation!" he says. "This place is so much like home I just believe I'll stay awhile."

So Old Horny found him an Injun gal and started in house-keeping. Time came and time went. Everybody knows the Devil's always busy, and soon the house was full of children. And mean! Law! They was every one as mean as the Devil—which is natural, seeing as he was their pappy—and as dark and treacherous as their mammy. They beat and hammered at Old Horny day and night. They tricked and mortified him till it was pitiful. Finally he just couldn't stand it no longer at all.

"I might as well be in Hell with my old crabby wedlock wife," says he. So he packed his traps and sneaked out of the house and went a-skillyhooting back to Hell as fast as ever he could. And they do say it was them offsprings of Old Horny that growed up and started the Melungeon kind.

The Melungeons themselves tell another story. They say they come from Portugal a long time ago and sailed in a big ship across the wild seas till they reached this country. Then some sort of a hardness sprung up betwixt the captain and the sailormen and they had a bloody scrap and the sailormen won. Soon as they'd hung the captain and his friends, the sailormen set the ship afire and went ashore and hid out in the woods. By and by they found a tribe of Injuns and made off with the women. Then they wandered and they roamed. Where all they went there's no telling. Some time or other they crossed over the high mountains into Tennessee and set down to stay hereabouts and have been here ever since.



Anyhow, in the early eighteen hundreds the Melungeons was here. So the white settlers commenced a-coming in and noticing what good creek-bottom farms the Melungeons had. Them great grandpappies of ours just wanted them farms till they hurt. They was a breed that got what they wanted. If the Melungeons had been plain Injuns, it wouldn't been no

trouble to kick them out. But here they was, a-speaking English, and on top of that they was Christians. Some of them had fought in the war against the English.

Well, the white settlers didn't want to do nothing that wasn't right with the Lord and the Law. So they scabbled around and studied it from all sides and directions. They knowed the Melungeons, like the Cherokees, had let runaway slaves hide out amongst them. This with their dark skins was enough to make our grandpappies see pretty plain that the Melungeons was a niggerfied people. The more they looked at them good Melungeon bottom lands, the plainer they saw that nigger blood.

So they passed a law. They fixed it so that nobody with nigger blood could vote, hold office, or bear witness in court. Then they got busy and sued for the bottom lands. Pretty soon the Melungeons lost all their holdings in law suits. They couldn't testify for themselves on account of the new law, and the white settlers had the backing of that law and, if they needed it, the militia. There just wasn't nothing left for the Melungeons to do but move into the high ridges.

And that's when the trouble started. Yes, it was real murder and bloodshed trouble, not one of your little puny feud fights.

On black nights in the dark of the moon the Melungeons come a-raiding down into the coves and valleys. They done their meanness quick, shooting the farm people—man, woman, and child—and slipping back to the ridges. They left burning barns and houses behind them, they killed the stock, and fired the crops in the fields. Mighty few whites lived to tell of it when them devils had been around.

Time and time again the whites would get up a big posse,

armed to the bootstraps, and head for the Melungeon country. They never got much far. The Melungeons laid for them and bushwhacked their daylights out. About the best the white folks could do was catch a stray Melungeon every once in so often and hang him high.

Yea, in yonder troubled time these old coves and ridges was nigh enough to hell to smell the brimstone smoke. But time run along and both sides sort of begun to let up a little by little.

All at once the whites wanted to plumb bury the hatchet. Yes sir, they decided it the minute the word spread out that the Melungeons had come on some gold back in the ridges. Law yes! The hatchet was just naturally a-going to be buried forever—or anyhow till the Melungeons told where that gold was a-coming from. Well, it wouldn't wash, this peace and brotherly love talk. The Melungeons just wouldn't listen. They started trading with the whites, but not a peep about the whereabouts of that gold would they let out.

They must've rigged up some sort of smelter or other and their own mint, because they begun bringing out a kind of rough-cut double eagles. Everywheres in these parts store-keepers took in them double eagles and no questions asked. And for good reason, too! Must have been twenty-five or thirty dollars' worth of fine soft gold in them. So the store-keepers got fat and sassy on Melungeon trade and everything was fine.

By and by the news got around and even Washington heard about it. The Government got hopping mad, so I've heard, and sent in a bunch of officers to stop the counterfeit making. And then there *was* hell to rip! The storekeepers just wouldn't stand for it. They got hot in behind the politicians and pulled

strings. Pretty soon word come from Washington for the officers to come on home and forgit it.

Finally the supply of gold must've give out. Anyhow, the Melungeons stopped a-bringing in the double eagles. White folks still tried to find where it come from, but no sir, thank you, them Melungeons kept it their bosom secret. Today I don't reckon even the Melungeons know where the mine was. Leastwise, they don't say so if they do. Gold's been located in North Carolina, I hear, and a few years ago there was a to-do in the newspapers about a mine being found up in Kentucky. For all anybody can say, there's still a plenty of gold back here in these ridges somewheres.

After the gold stopped a-coming, the Melungeons was as poor as gully dirt again. Oh, they still done some trading down into the valleys but it wasn't much, just mostly herbs and ginseng and such. Whites left them alone because they were so wild and devil-fired and queer and witchy. If a man was fool enough to go into Melungeon country and if he come back without being shot, he was just sure to wizen and perish away with some ailment nobody could name. Folks said terrible things went on back yonder, blood drinking and devil worship and carryings-on that would freeze a good Christian's spine-bone.

Well, first thing anybody knowed the Civil War busted out. Most of the men hereabouts joined up with the Union and started in fighting. But you can bet a pretty the Melungeons didn't burn no shoe leather hotfooting it to the colors—the Stars and Bars nor the Stars and Stripes, neither one. They figgered it wasn't their fight. After the war got a-going, a heap of them took up bushwhacking and made a proper good thing out of it. The old folks say for years after the war the Melun-

geons was still a-trying to git the blue and gray pants and coats they'd taken from supply trains wore out. They was plenty of killings enduring those bad old war times, but all of them can't be hung on the Melungeons. Too many gangs of white bushwhackers, draft dodgers, and deserters rampaging about in the hills for that. But Lord knows they were up to enough mischief, though, at that.

Anyways, the shootings and burnings started the old trouble again and there was ambushes and raids a plenty back and forth for years. Even right lately it was a mighty dangerous business for a Melungeon or a white to be caught in the other's stomping grounds. Peace officers never even tried to take the law back into them Melungeon ridges.

The whites always claimed the Melungeons was a nigger breed and nobody can deny some of them really was. Some of them mixed and mingled with niggers and got the name of Blackwaters. The pure breed Melungeons wouldn't have nothing to do with the Blackwaters. They called themselves Ridgemanites or Hill Portughee, and today there's not any difference much betwixt them Ridgemanite Melungeons and the rest of us.

Why, I don't reckon over twenty or thirty outright Melungeon families are left around here. Some of them moved West after the Civil War. I've heard tell of one patch of them that settled somewheres in the Ozarks and is still there to this self-same day. A good many Melungeon bucks was drafted into the army enduring the German War and their families drifted off to the North.

But it will be a long old time before the Melungeons are forgotten back through here. Not as long as the old folks like to talk and the young'uns listen, nor as long as there's high old

tales to tell. Now, take the stories of Shep Goins, the Melungeon fool-killer, and Big Betsy, the Melungeon she-devil moonshine queen, for instance. . . .

*James R. Aswell*



### *Fool-Killing Shep Goins*

IT WAS A LONG TIME BACK, AND JUST WHERE-abouts I don't know. Some says it was in Rhea and some says Hancock. It must have been somewheres or they wouldn't talk about it like they do. They tell me that this Shep Goins was a long tall slab of meat, most six foot tall and a half, with that dark Melungeon skin and a kind of lengthy and drawed out face and a sizable beaky nose. He was just a plain ordinary



and no-count Melungeon until it come a brush-arbor revival meeting. Where they had it there's no telling. But they had it. And seems like Shep and a powerful turn of others got moved by the holy spirit enduring the meeting. That red-headed Preacher Puddefoot must've been one powerful exhorter to git them Melungeons afear'd about their souls. Anyways they let him duck the whole kit and boiling of them under the creek, and I can't name that *creek* for you neither! I just know what I hear, and the name of the creek wasn't in it.

So right soon after that old Shep started on his doings. Started making them Melungeons step all over the place.

Now, seems like Shep vows Old Master come to him in the night. "Shep," Old Master says, "there's too many pure fools running around loose hereabouts. Am I right?"

Shep he says, "Yes sir, truer word was never spoken ever. Too many fools!"

"All right then," Old Master says to Shep. "The hills is full to hard-down busting with fools. I hate fools the worst kind, Shep. So what do you aim to do about it, Shep?"

Shep thought about some scripture words this Jepson preacher was always dragging in and they come in handy to him. He says, "Have thine own way, Lord." He says, "Anything you want done, just you say the word. Shep Goins is your man."

Old Master stood there a-straddle of Shep's bed. "That's fine spoke, Shep," says he. "Now I tell you what I want you to do. You're a pretty fair shot, ain't you?"

That went all over Shep. "Fair, hell!" he says. "If I ain't the best shot anywheres around here I'll eat a red bull and it bellerin'!"

Old Master says to him, "All right, Shep. Take your rifle, Shep. Take it and practice up. Because you got to be a thundering good shot, Shep, when you're rambling on the Lord's work.

"So take your rifle. And every time word gits to you that any of your people been doing foolment, shoot them down cold dead. For I'm fixing to make these here hill Portughee my chosen people, Shep. The Hebrew children has let me down. And I don't want no fools amongst my chosen people. I'm leaving it in your hands to weed out the fools, Shep Goins."

When he heard that, Shep felt like somebody'd taken and turned the world arsy-versy. Old Master was gitting dim and fading out and Shep was all a-sweating and blowing and studying about the big job of work he'd been give.

So he yells, "Wait a minute, please sir! How in the nation can I git around to all the fools on this earth? It'd take me mighty nigh a hundred years to make a start on just Tennessee!"

"You got me wrong, Shep," says Old Master. He was gitting smokier every minute. "Leave the rest of the world to Old Horny. He'll git them anyways. You stay right here in the hills. You trim your own folks into shape so's I can choose them. Let everybody else wallow in sin to hellfire."

When he heard that, Shep felt a heap easier in his mind. It was a tall chance of work, but he figgered he could do it if he lived long enough to.

Come morning and Shep already had his first fool picked out. He up and shot a neighbor man. Seems like the man was figgering on sending his children to some sort of school somewhere. So Shep laid him low. "He's only one fool," Shep



says, "but if he sends them children to school, it'll make six fools I'll have to git shet of sooner or later. Schools is fool factories."

The sheriff of whatever county it was didn't bother them Melungeons just so long as they didn't aggravate the white folks. So Shep he didn't have no trouble about the shooting. It run on like that for months and weeks. Every now and then Shep Goins would git him another fool. Let a Melungeon do some bragging and blowing off at the mouth. Pretty soon they'd be burying him with one of Shep Goins' bullets smack

betwixt his eyes. They got to where they would set down and study long and hard about every little thing they put their hands to, scared that Shep Goins'd mark them up for a fool-killing. Shep got so he said he could just smell a man and tell was he a fool. Growed to be mighty proud of his work, Shep did.

The only one around there, wherever it was, that didn't sing low when Shep was around was Brother Puddefoot, that red-topped preacher. Preacher Puddefoot wasn't no Melungeon to begin with. He come from somewheres way over to West Tennessee. Like as not he had to hotfoot it to the hills to keep out of the jailhouse. And he didn't belong to no special church, neither. Just preached for his self. They say when he first showed up amongst the Melungeons he was a sorry sight. Looked like the buzzards picked him, he was so all in rags and jags and hungry-lank. But he hadn't been preaching and taking up collection hardly no time before he had a big fine belly on him and as slick a rig of clothes as you'll see anywheres. Them Melungeons somehow just naturally taken to him.

Well, him and Shep was both working for Old Master. So they got to be thicker than two drummers around a jug. And when Shep tells Brother Puddefoot how Melungeons was going to be the chosen people, that preacher he took a-holt of it. Bore down on it in his preaching. He had them Melungeons thinking their great day was rising tomorrow. It just ain't no wonder at all that they listened to Brother Puddefoot like he was John Paul Gospel his self!

So it was Preacher Puddefoot married a gal named Vandy May to Shep Goins. They say she was a likely looking little baggage, as cute as a bug. Heaps too good to be coupled up with that razorback Shep Goins. I reckon she thought he was

a fine match, he'd got to be such a big Somebody around there. Seems like the womenfolks goes for the big man every time. Find your Big Tail Pete and they's a mess of women buzzing around. It never fails. Even if this Vandy gal didn't take to that ugly cuss like a mammy cat takes to fish heads, she dast not say a peep about it. She married him and partnered his bed.

Well, Shep hadn't been a married man very long. Preacher Puddefoot comes to him and says, "How's the good work gitting on?"

"First rate," says Shep. "Just about got the fools whittled down, Preacher."

Puddefoot says, "That's just dandy, Shep! But look-a-here, Shep," he says, "you don't stand there and tell me you done put all the fools out of the business, do you?"

Shep he swelled up, proud as Punch. "Blame nigh," he says. "Maybe a few left, but they're so goddurn smart about hiding that they're fools that they got to almost have more sense than anybody else to do it."

Brother Puddefoot shaked his head and sucked in his lips. "That's just around here," he says. "How about all them Portughee that lives other places? I mean them in North Carolina and Kentucky and all?"

"Why," says Shep, "the Lord didn't in special say nothing about them others." He says, "Seems like to me he just meant those around here."

Puddefoot he give his head some sad shakes. "Oh no," he says. "The Lord don't do things halfway that-a-away. If he told you the hill Portughee, why he meant *all* of them, from the babe in womb to every last old grandpap. For he seeth every little sparrow which falls down, Shep."

Shep didn't like that notion at all. "Well," says he, "it looks to me like he'd told me flat-out if he aimed for me to tend to them others. I don't mind telling you, Preacher, I ain't minded the least little bit to go off right now. Why I just now got Vandy May to where she's wifing good."

Preacher Puddefoot says, "I tell you what, Shep. We got to pray on this. Nothing on earth like the sweet power of prayer, Brother Shep. I'm coming up to your place this very night. You and me will go down on our knees and ask the good Lord what he wants you to do."

And that's what Preacher Puddefoot done. Yes, him and Shep they got in the bedroom at Shep's cabin. Shep crooked down on his knees and the preacher taken a pillow off the bed and got down on *his* knees.

Then Brother Puddefoot sailed in. "O Lord, here's thy faithful servant Shep here. He's fair up a stump, Lord. Come to him tonight, O Lord, and stand by his bed. Come to him, if you want him to do like I told him, and say, 'Shep, I know the stew you're in. I'm a-going to help you out. Yes, Shep, I'm set on helping you out. Shep, I meant *all* the hill Portughee wheresoever they are. *All* the hill Portughee, Shep. Work on all of them, Shep!'"

Brother Puddefoot he kept at his praying for most an hour until Shep he was so all-fired sleepy he couldn't hardly see straight. You know how it is when a preacher gits a-praying around like that. You'll git buzzy and foolish in the head spite of all you can do.

And sure's doom's a-coming, Shep woke up that night. There stood Old Master a-straddling his bed and looking like a great big forky-legged cloud of fire.

"Shep," he says, "I know the stew you're in, and I'm a-going

to help you out. Yes, Shep, I'm set on helping you out. Shep, I meant all the hill Portughee. Work on *all* of them."

Nothing to it after that but for Shep to slip his halter and git on his way about prying out the fools amongst the Melungeons in other parts of the hills. So Shep he taken him his rifle and left home. He made Brother Puddefoot vow he'd look after Vandy May while he was away.

They say Shep was gone pretty close to over a year. Nobody heard a word about him enduring that time.

Then along about one night he showed up at Brother Puddefoot's place, all frazzled and wore out. He said he'd been in North Carolina and Kentucky and pretty nigh all over everywheres. Well, he brought back a left leg limp from a slug he'd been shot with. He had a new purple scald on his head where a man nigh brained him with an axe. Seems like the Melungeons off in other places didn't know Shep from Adam's Off Ox and didn't fancy him nosing in and shooting their fools up.

"I done all I could," Shep tells Preacher Puddefoot. "Yes, sir, I sure done my levelest best. But them peckerwoods give me all sorts and sizes of hell. Once they had me in the jail-house. But I busted out. They possied me with bloodhounds. But the Lord didn't let them catch me. They shot at me. It was going and coming. It was nip and tuck, and pretty plagued uncomfortable.

"So after a while I got to praying. Just like you showed me, Preacher. Yes, I prayed unto the Lord. I asked him to tell me if I could come back to Vandy May. And the Lord he did answer my prayer. He told me to go back home, and here I am."

Preacher Puddefoot shaken hands with him and tells him

how glad he is to see him. Then he pulls his face long and sucks in his lip. "Bless your heart, Brother Shep, you didn't git here a day too soon," he says.

"How come?" says Shep.

"I just come from up at your place," says Preacher. "I was up there seeing if Vandy May was all right," he says. "I been looking after her, Brother Shep. And Brother Shep, it's almost her time."

Shep says, "Now what *air* you talking about, Preacher?"

"I say it's almost Vandy May's time. Time the baby was a-borning."

Shep he let loose a lost-dog howl when he heard that. "What baby? *What baby?*"

Preacher holds his hands up and smiles sort of gentle. "Your baby, Brother Shep. Whose else, Brother Shep?" he says.

"It can't be my young one!" says Shep. He starts dancing around and waving his arms. "I been gone more than a year! Why damn your red fur, Brother Puddefoot! Have you been letting Vandy May loose around and grow me a pair of horns while I was gone—?"

Brother Puddefoot drawed his self up tall. "Easy there, Shep," says Brother Puddefoot. "I vow it *would* look queer if it was anybody else's wife but yours, Brother Shep. But, Brother Shep, think a spell. Don't forgit that the Lord picked you to do his work, Shep."

But Shep was gitting hotter and hotter. "That don't make no difference!" he yells. And his face got all swole up and went every color you can mention. "Thirteen months' time is too goddurn much, I tell you!"

And Shep he tried to go rushing out past Preacher Puddefoot.



But Preacher Puddefoot grabbed a-holt of Shep's shirt and held him back a minute. "Listen here!" says he. "You know how the Lord made the sun quit rolling long enough for the Hebrew children to whip the Philistines? You know how Moses hit the rock and the Lord did make a spring gush forth?"

Shep said he knowed about that. He slacked up on his pulling.

"Well, then," says the preacher. "Can't you see it, Shep?"

Shep said no he couldn't see it.

"Why it's just this," Preacher says. "The Lord *knowed* it would be hard on Vandy May a-birthing a young one without its pap here. So what did he do? He just made it slow a-coming. He just held it up until you got home."

Shep's eyes got big and he stood there studying. "And you reckon no man has got with her?"

"Reckon?" says Preacher Puddefoot. "Bless you, Brother Shep, I'm for certain sure! Why I been watching that gal like a hawk. I been taking care of her mighty careful, Brother Shep."

So after Preacher orated some more to him Shep went on home. He was feeling pretty puffy about Old Master holding Vandy May's time till he got back. Well, sir, they say he found Preacher Puddefoot told him right about Vandy May. She didn't look like she had more than a few days to go.

Well, and then Shep settled his self down to rest and wait. He was so whipped down tired from his rambling he couldn't hardly make it over to that red-headed preacher man's to tell him farewell. Seems like Preacher Puddefoot had to leave. It was on account of him gitting word that his old maw was lying on her deathbed in some far-gone place in West Tennessee.

Yes sir, and so the young one was born a week later.

And Shep he taken one look at that baby's red fuzz and went out and shot his self spank betwixt the eyes! Because Shep was fool-proud of his reputation for fool-killing.

*James R. Aswell*





### *Six Hundred Honest Pounds*

THEY SAY IT WAS BACK IN THE EIGHTIES, OR maybe the nineties, and in Hancock County. Whatever the year of it, there was a big barbecue and rabbit stew near the Powell River. A man running for Congress was who give it. Now, Hancock is still a mighty lean sort of place and all you have to do to git most of the whole county together on one point of ground is to let out that there'll be free eats. They'll come Ford-back, mule-back, foot-back, and a-crawling down

every little path out of the hills. They'll come like red ants to spilled honey.

And so it was this time I'm a-chawing about. Every soul for thirty mile around that warn't too feeble or crippled to move or too wanted by the Law to be seen in public places was there in that beech grove beside of the Powell River. Even a heap of folks from up across the Kentucky line—where it's pretty lean, too—was on hand trying their best to look like they was born and bred and done voting square in Hancock County.

The political speaking come first, of course. The eats and the fun is always left to the last so's everybody will be sure to stay and hear the speaking. So the man that was running for the Congress got up and bellered and raved and told what he was agin. And that was just about everything you could name excepting Free Silver and free seeds for the farmers. He was all for them free things. Well, anyhow, he had his say and most of the folks just squatted there in the beech grove and slept with their eyes stark open till he was plumb talked down.

The gathering begun to pearten up when he wiped his face and said, "I thank you good people, one and all, the best and clear-headedest people in the world, the people of Hancock County, the best little old county *anywhere!*" and set down. Then everybody made a heavy scramble for the big black kittles where the stew was a-steaming and the long board tables where the barbecue was laid out and for the whiskey barrels all stacked a-ready and a-waiting. So for half a hour there the people tore into that barbecue, chomping and a-grunting, ladled down that good rabbit stew, and supped at their tin cups full of bold likker.

When all this truck got kind of mixed around inside and

settled down, folks felt in the sociable way and was ready for the fun to commence.

And it commenced. First the call went out for wrastlers. The hardest knots in the county wiped their mouths and come elbowing through the crowd. There was two good baker's dozen of them—stringy long-cut scrappers and short butt-cut brawlers. There was men with wild beards and mean eyes and clean-faced men and men with handle-bar mustaches. Scufflers, fist-fighters, knock-down and drag-out trouble makers, kickers, butt-ers, gougers, and ear-chawers—they all stood around sneering at each other and skeeting baccy-beer at each other's boots and making their brags.

The judges was just before pairing the wrastlers up when here come a woman a-pushing round the edge of the crowd. Nobody much noticed her till there she stood among the wrastlers. She warn't overly high, but she was so all-fired broad and square that she looked like a packing case with a round head stuck on top. Yes, she was a youthsome barefoot woman in a short kind of dress and a big man's blue jumper heaps too little for her and all sprung out at the seams. Another thing was her dark face, with high cheekbones and slanting eyes as black as swamp water. Everybody knowed then that she was a Melungeon woman and they stared like they was seeing a blue bear. In them days Melungeons just naturally stayed out of the way when white folks got together.

So one of the judges called out, "Everybody clear back excepting the wrastlers!"

The Melungeon woman just stood there.

So the judge says, "I mean you!"

"I'm a wrastler," says she, and her voice was so deep and heavy that the judge jumped back a step.

All the wrestlers laughed. "Wrestling's for men!" they said.

She was a-chawing baccy. She let fly at the ground and it smacked up a little cloud of dust. "Maybe to *now*, hit's been," says she. "But I'm Betsy Mullins—they call me Big Betsy—and I do hail from Newman's Ridge. I'm a woman with all the womanly trimmings, but don't let hit bother none of you. For I'm a better man than any of you rounders here!"

And she let fly some more baccy juice, she throwed back her head and she laughed.

All the wrestlers was tore up and mad. Bad enough to be sassed by a woman and when that woman was a Melungeon in the bargain—well, no strong-founded man would stand for it.

Easy the biggest man there was Black Joe Bascom and he was fair blaze-snorting for trouble. He looked her over from top to toe. He throwed off his jumper and shirt, drawed his belt in, and says, "Take heed, wench! I'm a-coming at you!"

And he come. Yes, he come in kicking and a-thrashing, with his teeth splitting his black beard and a-snapping the air. He meanted business, woman or no woman.

Seemed like Betsy Mullins meanted a little business too. She straddled her legs and a-flipped the muscles in her arms. But she kept a-chawing her baccy slow and stiddy as a heifer in the shade. She didn't flinch nor start an inch when Black Joe give a last whoop and a jump.

A power of dust was kicked up. It was hard to see what was happening. Looked like and *sounded* like somebody in there was a-beating carpets and a-driving stobs at one and the same time. But not for long.

For in a minute something come a-rolling out. End over end, it come and wrapped around a tree trunk. It was nobody but Black Joe Bascom, limp and sound to sleep. And there stood

Betsy Mullins with half of Black Joe's beard in her right fist.

"Is this here the best you can do?" says she, jerking her head towards Black Joe. "Don't tell me!" She got a plug of eating baccy out of her jumper pocket. She bit off a chew and looked at the bunch of wrastlers a-standing there with their mouths full of teeth.

The men just sort of cleared their throats and shuffled their feet.

"Why then," says Betsy, "I'll take on any two of you to once. Or if *two* of you will git lonesome, I'll make hit *three*. Any three, any style scuffling—I don't keer, I'm shore."

But they done her one better. Four of them hemmed in on her from four directions and the dust begun to fly and out of it come a sound like a crew of choppers a-cutting railroad ties.

Well, it lasted about four times longer than the scuffle with Black Joe Bascom and it made four times more dust and taken four times longer to clear away so's a body could see what had happened.

Then all the folks just choked and whistled. For there set Betsy Mullins on a stack of four men, piled up like cordwood. Seemed like the seams of her jumper was sprung a little more, but warn't no other signs on her. She warn't even a-blowing from it.

"Come on, you rounders!" she says. "If the men round here is *this* puny, I reckon I'm good-able to take on the rest of you at one whack."

What was left of the wrastlers looked at Betsy Mullins. They looked at the pile of men she was a-setting on and at Black Joe Bascom, still asleep in a heap by the beech tree. They looked at each other and they looked at the ground. They didn't say a word nor make a move.

So Betsy she waited a little, then got up and shaken the settled dust off her and says, "Aw now! Maybe I'd better come at *you!*" And so she cocked back both fists and started towards that bunch of hard knots. Yes, she come at them like a boulder rolling loose.

Well, for just a bit there it looked like them big strappers aimed to hold their ground. But then one of them yelled, "Keep that danged she-Melungeon off me!" and broke and run. And in no time every last one of them hard knots swung to and busted out for unknown places.

So Big Betsy Mullins blinked her eyes and fuddled around like she was a-looking for somebody to scuffle with. Then she turns to the judges where they was standing and a-staring like they was seeing supernaturals. She says, "Gents, hit does look like I winned, now don't hit?"

"Why yes," says the head judge. "Why yes." He thought hard and then says, "Why-uh-yes."

"Yo're giving a fat shoat for the prize, ain't you?" says Big Betsy.

"Why yes," says the judge.

"Well," says she, "supposing you keep hit and let me name a prize that hit won't cost you a penny."

The judge he said it again, so Big Betsy says, "Just give me yore leave to sell a few little old gourds here, if anybody'll buy. That's all I ask, yore Judgeship."

So the head judge—and he was a real lawcourt judge as well as a barbecue wrastling judge—he said he didn't see no harm in it, he reckoned. She might as well go on and sell her gourds, he said.

"Word of honor," Big Betsy says, "that nobody will try to stop me nor do me no damage after I'm through?"



"Shore I give my word," says the judge, "and I give my honor."

So that Melungeon woman just held her hands to her mouth, taken a long breath, and sung out, "Hooooo *peeg, peeg, peeg, peeg!*" And it rung out through that beech grove like the reaching blast of a good brassy bugle-horn, "*Peeg! Peeg! Peeg!*" she bellered.

Well, a dozen or so razorback hawgs that had been a-rooting around in the woods come a-snorting but Big Betsy didn't pay them no notice. She was looking towards the Powell River.

And mighty soon all the gathered-round folks there did see what she was a-waiting for. They did see seven dark and bare-foot Melungeon bucks come-a-trotting out of the cane-brake. And each of them toted seven big stoppered gourds slung from a yoke round his neck.

It was gitting rare warmish in the beech grove and the free whiskey was all drank and folks was sweating and a-gitting thirsty. So when these here Melungeons passed round and pulled the stoppers out of the gourds and everybody whiffed rich likker, a big whoop went up and there was a rush of business.

But the judge says to Betsy, "Whoa, woman! Air that governmentally stamped whiskey in them gourds?"

Betsy she looked him smack in the eyes and says, "Yore Judgeship, no."

"Well," says he, "you can't sell it, then."

"I *can* sell hit, yore Judgeship," she tells him. "I've got the authority to. You give hit to me just awhile ago. If you want the world to call you a bare-faced liar, a two-double Injun-giver on yore own sweared word—well I can't keep you from hit."

When the judge studied about it and did see how slick he'd

been sold, he just laughed and told her to go ahead and sell her likker. "*This* time," he said, "but never again no more, ever!"

"Thankee kindly, yore Judgeship," says Betsy. "I thankee for me and for them seven husbands of mine that's too busy selling drinks to thankee themselves."

"Seven husbands!" says the judge. "Why, woman, that's strictly bigamy!"

"I thought hit was pretty big of me, too, yore Judgeship, when I taken them seven men on last year. I warn't but only sixteen then. But now I'm turned seventeen and got my full growth I'm a-looking for a few more good husbands. Spread the word around, won't you, yore Judgeship?"

The judge he just set down on the ground and sleeved the sweat off his face and never said another frazzling word. He just sort of muttered to himself and wandered off a-shaking of his head.

From then on that Melungeon-breeded woman begun stirring up a right smart of talk around Hancock County. There was a good tripled-up reason for such talk. First place was you didn't often meet up with three hundred honest pounds of she-woman like Big Betsy Mullins—not in old lean Hancock, no-ways. You seldom no time never run across moonshine likker as fine as what her and her husbands made back in the briars on Newman's Ridge. It was away the best moonshine in Hancock County and folks that knowed good likker sent all the way from far-gone places to buy it. On top of all that, it got to be where Big Betsy was the most arrestedest party in the whole stretch of the up-country.

Well now, after Betsy had sold her ungovernment-stamped-less whiskey right out at public gathering that way and before a judge, too, it was right natural that Revenuers would be



a-watching to see if she done it *again*. So when it got to be that folks from the far end of Hancock County and even from over in Grainger and Claiborne would scrabble up to Newman's Ridge to pay seventy-five cents a gallon for Betsy's likker, when they could git all they wanted—and good stuff, too—for fifty cents a gallon, why the Revenuers couldn't help but notice. So it warn't a whole year after that barbecue feed before a party of Revenuers scuffled and scrambled, hanging tooth and nail for dear life, up Newman's Ridge. Single file they come up the straight-up-and-leaning-back trail of the cliff to the top where Betsy's cabin set on the very backbone of the Ridge.

Betsy come to the kitchen door. She watched them drag up the last few yards of the way. "Take hit easy, boys!" she yells to them. "Hit's powerful steep and slickery right about there. And you needn't be afeared I'll leave. There ain't no other way down from here."

They finally make it up, all five of them, and stood round the kitchen door a-puffing and a-blowing. Then the head leader agent—a little spindle-shank of a man he was—caught his breath a little and says, "Betsy Mullins, I arrest you for moonshining in the name of the United States government law." And then he stepped back a step right quick and looked at her watchful.

"Why, shore, boys, shore," says Betsy, a-chawing stiddy. "I been expecting of you boys for a long time now. What kept you so long?"

"Well, Betsy, we been sort of waiting around to catch you down in the lowland," says the number-one debity. "But seems like you don't git down there so much. So we finally seen we'd have to come up and git you."

"Right enough, boys," she says, "and I'm rarely pleased to see all of you. Come in and take a few cheers. Seems to me

there's a gourdful or so of some prime ripe likker somewhere about that'd maybe hearten you up a bit after yore hard pull."

"Thank you kindly enough, Betsy," says the head leader agent, "but we really ain't got the time. We aim to git back down this hardsome trail right along before dark catches us. So if you'll just git them gourds for evidence and come along peaceable-like, why we'll be a-gitting on back to Sneedville."

"Don't blame you a bit, boys," says Betsy. "That trail is right worrisome after dark, specially a-going down. And welcome enough to the gourds you are, too. But I'm afeard I can't go long with you this time, boys, much as I'd like to."

"Take care there what you say, Big Betsy," says the head leader agent. "You can be lawfully shot in the name of the law for resisting arrest."

Big Betsy says, not missing a chomp on her chawing, "I know that right well, Mister Agent. And I ain't a-resisting no arrest. You have done legally arrested me and I have freely agreed. All I'm a-telling you is that if you want me to come down this ridge, you'll have to carry me somehow. I done sprained my ankle so bad I can't bear to touch hit to ground, let alone put my full weight on hit."

The agents then taken notice that her right ankle was wrapped in near ten yards of bright home-spun cloth. They looked at Big Betsy standing there with her right arm propped agin the doorjamb and they looked at each other. Betsy had gained easy fifty pounds during the year and she was nearing four hundred pounds. They looked back at the trail they'd scrambled up by the hardest. How it come straight up single file for eighty or ninety feet, and then leaned back out *more* than straight up for the last fifteen or eighteen feet. It warn't but barely possible for a man to git up the first eighty or ninety

feet and it warn't really possible at all to git up the last fifteen or eighteen feet. How they done it, they didn't know themselves.

Then they looked back at Betsy and thinked about lugging that nigh four hundred pound of she-brute down that trail. The biggest debity of all—six-foot-six, three-hundred-pound scrapper, he was—groaned out loud.

The number-one debity says, "Oh my God!" and slempt down to the ground, flat on his face. And the little spindly head leader agent taken a bad fit of the shuddering jerks. "Dad fetch it all!" says he, betwixt tooth chatters, "must be a whole slew of rabbits playing hopscotch over my grave-place!"

Well, the short of it was, Betsy had them.

There just warn't no way a-tall, possible nor not possible, that they could've taken that big she-brute down that trail. So they smashed up one of Betsy's mash tubs, so's they could say they done it, and dranked a few gourds of Betsy's prime ripe likker to hearten them up a bit and said their prayer-pieces to themselves and started back down the trail. And somehow they all made it back.

After that there warn't a year passed but at least two or more parties of a head leader Revenuer agent and his debities would scramble up that trail to Betsy's cabin on Newman's Ridge. But it was always the same. Betsy was arrested freely enough but she always had ailing foot trouble of some sort and couldn't walk. And there warn't no possible way to cart her down.

Betsy had got so she didn't even leave her cabin. She didn't have no need to. She was taking on one or two new husbands every year and sometimes more if one happened to die off on her. So her husbands made the likker and sold it and waited on Betsy hand and foot and she didn't have a frazzling thing

to do but set in her special big rocking cheer, that was carved from a solid oak stump, and rock and chaw her eating baccy. When the Revenuers would ask where her still was she would truthfully say she didn't know. Her husbands moved it about from one thicket briar-hell to another.

Time slipped along and went by like this for a long spell. Some says it was six, some eight, some says as much as fifteen or more years. But anyhow, the tale got to be told around and finally leaked back to Washington, D. C., that the Revenuer agents and their debities didn't do a form thing when they went to arrest Betsy Mullins but throw big party drunks and drink up a few gallons of Betsy's prime ripe likker and bust up one measly mash tub. The same one every time. One of Betsy's husbands would put the pieces together again when the agents left and leave it there a-waiting for them to come back and bust it again.

So the big chief head leader United States government Revenuer agent in charge in Washington, D. C., was some peeved about this. He called him a meeting and they jibbered and jawed for a week or two and laid plans to git big Betsy Mullins. They vowed they would bring her down off of that Newman's Ridge and try her.

So, maybe a month later it was, a whole special crew of Revenuer agents and debities and rock quarry men—drillers and blasters and such like—scrambled and toiled up the trail to Newman's Ridge. Twenty-two men on the crew there was, and two debities that had been there before to show the way. They taken sledge hammers and rock drills and dynamite and ropes and pulleys and chains and blocks and tackles and a whole slew of such like stuff. They aimed to git Big Betsy Mullins and bring her down off of that ridge and try her.

When they got to the last cliff where the trail went straight up for eighty or ninety feet, the rock-drillers and quarry men went to work. Every three feet they drilled them a hole in the rock and set them a thick iron rod in it, sunk two feet in the solid rock and sticking out a foot and a half. It taken them three full weeks to set them rods up the eighty or ninety feet to where the trail commenced to lean back.

There the rock-drillers and blasters went to work. They drilled holes deep into the rock and charged them with dynamite. Then they clumb down the iron rod steps and got back away from the foot of the cliff and set off the dynamite. They aimed to blow off that overhanging lip-edge and level the trail at least straight-up-and-down all the way if they couldn't do no better.

They blasted away at that overhang for three days and by then it was pretty near gone. It taken them longer than they figgered because on the second day they was a-blasting, Betsy sent a couple of her husbands out to ask them to please make them dynamite charges a little bit littler. She said the blasts was so big they shaken the cabin some and hurted her rheumatics.

So on the fourth day they set off the last blast and blowed off the last of the lip-edge of the cliff. Then they started to putting in iron rods the rest of the way up. They rushed the work and finished that up by nightfall. And now the trail was all done.

Next day the whole crew of agents, debities, rock-drillers, blasters and all, clumb up the cliff trail to the top. The head leader agent picked out a spot in the solid rock of the ridge backbone, and two men set to drilling a hole straight down.

Then the head leader agent went over to the wide open door



of Betsy's cabin. Betsy set there in her big solid oak rocking cheer, a-rocking and chawing stiddy.

"Hidy-do, mam," says he, a-taking his hat off. "Yore Mrs. Big Betsy Mullins, I take it. I'm a United States Revenuer agent and it's my bounden duty to place you under arrest."

"Why shore, Mister Agent, shore," says Betsy. "Ain't none of you boys called on me in a long time and I been a-kind of missing you. Come in and take you a cheer and tell me what you boys are a-doing. You shore been making a mighty miration around here. You'll excuse me for not gitting up, but the truth is I done got so heavy and my rheumatics is so bad, I can't bear my own weight a-tall. Just find you a cheer some where and one of my husbands will fetch you a gourd of prime ripe likker."

So Betsy puts her hands to her mouth and bellers, "Hooo, peeg, peeg, peeg!" and in no time at all a whole pack of Melungeon bucks come a-trotting up from somewheres on the ridge. One of them was a plumb young unbeardless boy, but most of them was fairly along in years. And the one that got there first was old and white-whiskered and bent.

"Jeremiah," says Betsy to him, "fetch Mister Agent here a gourdful of our best likker to sup while he tells me about what he's a-doing. And you might ask the debities and rest of the crew out there to have some, too. See that all git what they desire."

But the head leader agent says, "No, thankee kindly, Mrs. Big Betsy, but I can't allow it. We aim to take you back down and try you and it wouldn't be noways right for us to drink this ungovernment stampedless whiskey."

"Just suit yoreself, Mr. Agent," says Betsy. "You're kindly welcome to hit. Now, tell me, just how you aim to git me down

from this ridge, when I weight better'n five hundred pounds and can't bear my foot on the ground? Just how do you aim to do hit?"

So the head leader agent told her about how they'd blasted away the lip-edge and set iron postes in the trail. "And now we're a-setting one great big post on the ridge backbone to anchor a block and a tackle to. We aim to let you down off this ridge in a big rope sling and then cart you from cliff bottom in a wagon."

Big Betsy went right along with her rocking and chawing. "Uh-huh," she says, "I see. Well now, that sounds like a right smart notion. Did you think that all up by yoreself?"

"Well, no mam, not *quite* all by myself," says the head leader agent. "Some of the little details was thinked out by others. But mostly it's my own figgerment." And he rared back in his split-bottom cheer and sticked his thumbs in his vest armholes.

And that just shows you, you never can tell how many ducks will hatch from a setting of goose eggs. Next day they finally had every fired thing ready—everything a body could think of, the big iron post set, the block and tackle all rigged up, a harnessed team and wagon a-waiting at the foot of the cliff and even a whopping big pillow and some padded coverlets to make Betsy easy in the rope sling. So now they was ready to git her.

The head leader agent went to the door of the cabin. He taken his hat off and turned it around in his hands.

"Good morning to you, Mrs. Big Betsy," he says. "I'll thank you kindly and take it right well of you if you come along with us without no trouble."

"Shorely enough, Mister Agent," says Big Betsy Mullins. "I'd come right along with you in a minute if only I could. But I can't move myself about a-tall now. Hit takes five or six

of my strongest husbands and nine of my weakest ones, to move me about from place to place now."

"Just you rest easy about that, Mrs. Big Betsy," says the head leader agent. "I'll call in a dozen of my men to cart you out to the cliff-edge."

"Well," says Big Betsy Mullins, "I reckon I might as well tell you this now and save you the trouble of gitting yore men in here. Fact is, Mr. Agent, I ain't able to leave this cabin a-tall. I ain't noways able to fit through that door frame now."

The head leader agent's mouth fell open till his chin near busted his kneecaps. It was a full ten minutes before he said a word.

"Why, then," he says at last. "Why-er, a-well-er—I guess I'll have to git my men to bust down one wall of this cabin."

"Don't you do hit, Mister Agent," says Betsy. "Hit wouldn't be noways healthy for you. I done asked a lawyer-man judge about hit, and he says that for what I'm charged with and the warrant you'd have, my house couldn't be noways damaged a-tall. And that is the way I'd have hit, so long as I live. My great-grandpappy built this here house with his own two hands, and I want hit should stay like he left hit."

Well, the head agent hummed and the head agent hawed and he stayed round the place for a week. He sent word and got word and he thinked and he talked, but he knowed from the first that Betsy was right. And he finally had to admit it.

Yes siree, Big Betsy had them again. There just warn't no way they could git her.

But her kinfolks did finally use that big iron post and the other fearsome work them agents and debities and rock-workers done. That was after Big Betsy died, must've been eighteen or twenty years after. They busted out a wall of her cabin then

and wrapped her in quilts and blankets and her husbands and kinfolks lowered her down. She had thirty-three husbands and fourteen cousins, and they all agreed that Betsy weighed six hundred honest pounds and maybe then some.

And she keeps a-growing after death, too—for the last time I did hear her story told, she'd made it up to seven hundred pounds.

*James R. Aswell*

*E. E. Miller*



## *A Stroke for the Kingdom*



BROTHER BILLY STUART RODE THE LONGEST circuit in East Tennessee.

Brother Billy was young and a mighty man. He preached the glory of God and the sinful power of the Devil. When he stood before a congregation, six-foot-two-inches tall, his wavy brown hair falling down to his shoulders and gray-green eyes blazing as he told the torments of the damned, people just cowed down before him. The biggest and meanest man in the house would feel like a whipped cur dog.

"Yes!" Brother Billy would shout. "The stink of that blazing pitch and brimstone will be in your nostrils forever! And the horrible stink of your own burning flesh, all rotten with slime and corruption! And the fiery flames leap up from the coals, the white-hot coals that make up the whole floor of Hell! And the fire rains down from the flaming sky forever and ever and ever!"

One mighty arm would shoot out in front of him.

"You!" he'd shout, pointing right at the biggest and meanest man. "You! Yes I mean you, my brother, my friend and brother in Jesus! Give up your sinful ways and come to the mourners' bench! Come and be washed in the blood of the Lamb and be whiter and purer than snow!"

I tell you, it made a man feel low. Even the best of them.

Then Brother Billy would tell about Heaven, his eyes all soft and dreamy. Dreamy and faraway they'd look now, near about lost behind his long dark lashes. The very air in the church would be soft and mild and sleepy. The men would nod in their seats, but the women looked and listened.

Yes, Brother Billy was a mighty man. The women all sighed and the menfolks feared him. He made a sight of converts.

But when Brother Billy said he was going up into Hancock County to preach, other folks told him to sky clear of it.

"Only Melungeons and such-like trash lives there," they said, "and it won't do no good to preach to them, they're such an ungodless lot. Some says they worship the Devil. They really ain't worth saving. Why, it's downright dangerous to be among them and that Shad Bolton in particular. He's a mean un if ever there was one."

Brother Billy says, "Spread the word of God and fear naught. I shall go among them and preach."

And he did. The folks around about Sneedville finally let him hold a meeting in a little bitty two-by-one-and-a-half log house. Even then they acted some grugged about it and no more than six or seven, mostly women, came to the meeting.

But Brother Billy wasn't a smidgin put-off. He preached Hell-fire and harp music at them, same as if five hundred people were there, and rode away singing a hymn.

And when he came back a month later, he had maybe twenty

or thirty to hear him. Mostly women, he noticed. Brother Billy didn't much like that.

"I got to get the men," he says to himself, "before I can do any good. You can always count on the women. And I can get the rest of the men if I just get Shad Bolton. Yessir, Shad Bolton's the man I want to convert."

So Brother Billy told out he would hold a revival meeting to last a whole week at Far Willow River. That was halfway between Sneedville and Bardstown and he figured he might be able to get the Sneedville menfolks to come, with the help of their women. He'd noticed that Shad Bolton's woman, Leola, always came to his preachings. Right up front, she'd sit with her big black-set eyes looking right into his, and leaning forward to listen. A tall youngish woman, she was, with skin the color of buckwheat honey and hair like a black hawk's wing. The best-favored woman in these hills, thought Brother Billy. And that Shad Bolton was as ugly and onery looking a slab-sided, hammer-jawed hunk of a man as ever grew to be six foot tall.

So when Brother Billy gave out that he was holding a revival meeting and invited the Sneedville menfolks in particular, Shad Bolton's woman was hot after him to go.

"Oh Shad," she says. "*Do* come and be washed in the blood of the Lamb."

"In the blood of a she billy-goat!" Shad says. "If you mean in that muddy slop that fills up Far Willow River, not by a damn sight, woman! I just as soon burn in Hell as freeze in a pile of mud."

"Don't talk that way, Shad," she says. "It's sinful and dangerous, too. I want you to be saved, Shad, same as me. Then we'll be together in Heaven."

"Together in a bear's belly!" says Shad. "We're together right now, ain't we? Well, that's good enough for me. Come here, you fine piece of a wench! Now you forget all about this washing-pure crap, or I'll bust your goddamn neck!"

But Leola, Shad's woman, looked worried. "Oh Shad," she says, "*please* come. See, Shad, I'm asking you on my knees! I'm praying for you, Shad. Oh, if you could just hear Brother Billy. Just once. He's such a fine man, Shad, I *know* he could save you. When he stands up there before you so fine and straight and strong you can feel the power of God so hard it makes you dizzy. And the look in his eyes is the look of angels, and his voice is the sound of waters." Leola was just a-rambling on now, dreamy-like, not really talking to Shad.

Now Shad Bolton wasn't nobody's fool, even if he did have a face like a stubby bear's tail. "So *that's* the way things is," he thinks to himself. And aloud he says, "All right, woman, I'll go. I kind of hanker to see this angel-eyed, he-Billy preacher of yours, somehow. And even if he don't save me, I might be able to save *him* awhile, if I salt down his carcass enough!"

So come the day of the first preaching, Shad Bolton was right on hand. And so was every able-bodied man in Sneedville, after they found out Shad would be there. A good many men-folks from Bardstown came, too. And of course all the women from both towns, even though they were already saved.

Never before such another crowd had Brother Billy seen. He felt a heart-swelling inside him as he looked out at all those people. "The Kingdom of God is near at hand," Brother Billy says to himself. "Now if I just get Shad Bolton to come through, the rest of the crowd will follow. It will be the biggest stroke for the Lord ever struck in these mountains. I shorely will get Shad Bolton, if it's the last thing I do."



Brother Billy closed his eyes and prayed to himself: "Oh Lord, Shad Bolton's just *got* to come through! Oh God, help me make him sweat! Help me put the fear of Hell in his heart, and bring him through safe to be saved."

But Shad Bolton wasn't studying salvation. When Brother Billy got up to preach to the crowd and Shad saw how young and well-favored he was, Shad felt like a holly-tree bush inside him. Red and green all mixed up together, and little stickers all over. "I'll get that honey-jawed jabber-box," says Shad, "if I never do nothing again. But first I'll just let him have his say. I'd just like to see what he's got that's so hot. Then I'll take him to pieces barehanded right here before everybody."

Long about the end of the fourth day, Shad was beginning to find out what Brother Billy had. And he found it plenty hot, too.

Two or three times Shad had been right at the place he near about give way and repented. When Brother Billy had been going strong on Hell for three or four hours on end, Shad would be burning and blistering inside and out till he wanted to cut loose and howl and tear off his clothes and sink down into the cool waters of Far Willow River and just soak up that coolness forever. The breath of Hell blew hot on him. Why, already a good half of the menfolks had give in and repented and been baptized, when hadn't none of them meant to at all. They's all aimed to wait and see what Shad Bolton done, but it just got so hot they couldn't stand it.

But every time just when Shad was thinking he couldn't stand it another minute now, Brother Billy had shifted to Heaven. And that would bring Shad back to his senses. He'd see Leola standing right there beside him but her mind a far piece from him, looking into Brother Billy's eyes and listening dream-like

to that sloppy slush about pearly gates and gold-paved roads and he'd burn up another way. *Then* it was all he could do to keep from howling out loud and rushing up to the pine wood platform and tearing Brother Billy into little bitty bloody pieces barehanded.

But Shad managed to curb his temper and bide his time. "I'll let him say his say to the finish," he says to himself, "and *then* what I'll do to him!"

So Shad steamed and sweated in fear and steamed and stewed in hate, but he determined he'd let Brother Billy say out his say to the last.

Along in the midafternoon of the sixth day, Brother Billy was really bearing down. It was the middle of June and the first really hot day of summer. The air was sweltering hot and close, the ground was blistered and baked. Dust rose in a little cloud all around Brother Billy and his crowd of hearers, and settled down on them in layers. Their faces were streaked with sweat-streams in the dirt and the air heat shimmered above them. And Brother Billy was right in the hottest middle of Hell.

"You'll be fried and burned and roasted and baked!" he shouted. "Stark naked you'll be and wrapped about with a fiery mantle of flame! Your skin will parch and crack and peel from you like cracklin skins at soap-making! Fried to a cracklin you'll be, like a squirrel in a skillet of sizzling lard! Your tongue will be swole till it won't fit your mouth and your lips will be burnt to a cinder! And never a drop of water to wet em! Your brains will bake and boil in your head and your eyes will pop and stew in their juices! Your hair and your whiskers will burn in a flame that never will die down or lessen! A black shriveled cinder you'll be, but you never burn out or quit suffering! No! Every day you're in Hell your torture and pain grows greater!

Each day you suffer and agonize more and you burn for eternal forever!"

Shad couldn't stand it no longer. He could feel the flames of Hell in his mouth, and his eyeballs and tongue were a-swelling. He knew that he had to get to that water, or he'd bust out in flames and burn to a cinder right there where he stood.

"I'm coming!" he yells. "Oh God, I *have* been a sinner! Oh yes! I confess! I repent! Oh lead me down to the river, that sweet, wet, watery river!"

"Hallelujah! Praise God! Shad Bolton comes to the mourners' bench!" Brother Billy sung out. He dropped down on his knees and turned his face up to the sky. "Oh God," he says, "Dear Lord, we thank thee that Shad Bolton is saved! We thank thee humbly, oh God, that Shad will not burn forever. No, God, Shad will now enter those pearly gates where you sit on your throne of gold. And choirs of angels will greet him and sing hosannas, plucking their harps of silver. And the cherubs and children will run to greet him, laughing and calling his name."

Shad felt like somebody had smacked him in the mouth with a slimy dead fish the morning after he'd had too much popskull. His stomach retched and heaved. He slackened his pace and tried to turn back. But it was too late now. He'd pushed through the crowd that opened before him, and was right beside the platform. And already the rest of the menfolks were crowding up hard behind him.

He looked back at Leola but she didn't see him at all. She was looking right at Brother Billy, kneeling there on the platform with his face turned up to the sky.

Shad blazed mad inside him and whirled back to face the platform. He opened his mouth and tried to say something but there was so much racket about him he didn't make no more

noise than a pea patch in a hail storm. All the menfolks were yelling "Glory to God!" and "I'm saved!" and "Hallelujah!" and slapping Shad on the back and confessing their sins at the end of their voice power, till Shad didn't know which way was up or which end was going. He just stood there with his fists doubled up and mad as fiery blazes, not knowing exactly what he was mad at or what he wanted except to get to that wet cool water.

Then Brother Billy got up from his knees and came down off of the platform. He put his hand on Shad's shoulder and looked right into his eyes. Shad felt calmed down a heap and the least little bit afeared. He hadn't never seen eyes like that before.

Then Brother Billy says in a deep voice: "Come, my son. Come, and be washed of your sins and be whiter and purer than snow." And he led Shad down into the water.

Shad was still mighty hot and sticky and he ached to feel that cool water. So he followed right behind Brother Billy.

Brother Billy says, "I baptize thee, Shad Bolton, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost." And he grabbed Shad by the arm and shoulder and soused him down, head and all, under the muddy water that filled up Far Willow River.

That water was just as cold as melted mountain snow could make it. When it closed over Shad's head it gave him a real turn and brought back his sense with a jolt. He came up from that water as mad as he'd ever been in his life.

It took him a minute to splutter the water out of his lungs and eyes and breathe in a mouth of air. Then he let out a roar.

"Damn you to hell!" he yells, "I aim to kill you dead, you honey-tongued, jabber-jawed gospel mill, you! I'll drown you as dead as a nine day corpse!" And he grabbed Brother Billy and tried to wrestle him down into the water.



But Brother Billy was a mighty man. Besides he knew if he lost Shad now he'd lose every convert he'd made. "The power of God be with me!" he says. "My son, repent of your evils. I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost!" And he soused Shad under again. This time he held Shad under for at least a full minute. Then it seemed to him that Shad's kicking was getting pretty weak, so he dragged him up out of the water and waited to hear what he would say.

Well, it took Shad more than two minutes to speak this time. He strangled and gurgled and spluttered and finally he spit out a tubfull of muddy river water and glubbed out something about "God damn—"

Brother Billy soused him under real quick before he could finish. "Oh God," says Brother Billy, "forgive him his blasphemous sins! I baptize thee, Shad Bolton, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!"

When he pulled Shad up this time he wasn't kicking a bit. Fact is, Shad was limp as a greasy dishrag. Brother Billy looked at him.

"I believe God has entered his heart," Brother Billy says to the crowd. "Lay him up there on the bank and some of you men revive him. Then if he ain't come through for God, I'll have to baptize him again."

"You're mighty durn right he's come through," the menfolks says. "If he ain't in a sensible mind when we bring him to we'll just baptize him ourselves, and drown the onery fool! Take him up there on the bank and let us down into this water! It's hotter than Hell around here!"

"Just hold your britches a minute," says Brother Billy. "It ain't right to rush the Lord's work."

Brother Billy knelt down in the water and turned up his

face to the sky. "Oh God," he says, "I thank thee. I thank thee that Shad Bolton's come through for God. I thank thee that thy humble servant, with thy help, oh God, struck a mighty stroke for the Kingdom this day!"

*E. E. Miller*















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